Inquisitor

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The Monastery

Bromrik Stonemantle was born in the soot-shadowed hamlet of Khordin, a weather-beaten mining town clinging to the cliffs above the Ironvein Gorge. The air in Khordin was thick with coal dust and the scent of damp stone, and its people lived short, calloused lives carved from the rock and shaped by the grim piety of the faith known as the Path of the Sacred Flame. This was the realm's dominant religion, a strict and ancient doctrine centered on purification through discipline, pain, and fire, with rituals that mirrored the forge—heat and pressure making the soul worthy of the gods' gaze. Bromrik's father, Galdor Stonemantle, served as the town's sole priest, presiding over a crumbling temple carved into the mountain's face. His mother, a quiet woman named Bruma, tended hearth and child with a wearied grace, her hands raw from years of scrubbing stone floors and mending secondhand cloth.

Poverty shadowed Bromrik's childhood like a second skin. Meals were meager, nights were cold, and faith was the only comfort allowed. Galdor raised his son with the rod and the scripture, demanding obedience, silence, and relentless self-denial. Bromrik took to the lessons with a fervor that quickly veered into zealotry. He found solace in the law, in the structure of the Sacred Flame's teachings, and when he came of age, he shaved his head, donned the robes of the faithful, and entered the Order of Sanctified Trial, the religious brotherhood of Khordin.

Years passed. He memorized scripture, debated doctrine, and rose swiftly through the ranks. He earned the respect of his peers and the fear of his superiors, for he asked the questions others were afraid to form. When the Great Purgation began—an era of fanatical cleansing decreed by the High Flamefather of the capital—Bromrik was summoned to take on the mantle of Inquisitor. His black beard now full and his hair bound behind a clasp shaped like a burning hammer, Bromrik accepted the title with grim pride.

Clad in soot-dark robes reinforced with chain beneath, he carries an iron-bound tome of religious law chained to his belt alongside vials of holy elixir and healing draughts. A heavy axe, marked with etchings of the Sacred Flame's runes, rests at his side—a tool of judgment as much as war. He is a dour figure: rarely smiling, frequently muttering prayers, and often seen with a pipe clenched between his teeth. Though he holds the law in reverence, Bromrik is no saint. He has been known to accept gold in exchange for mercy, especially when the accused are harmless or when coin is needed to grease the machinery of his work. Yet his moods swing like a warhammer—sometimes merciful, sometimes cruel, and always unpredictable.

Now, he journeys from Khordin toward the mountain-shrouded Monastery of Embershroud, where the High Purifier awaits with new instructions. There, Bromrik will receive a scroll bearing the names of the accused—heretics, apostates, and the doubtful. His task: to find them, interrogate them, and deliver the Sacred Flame's justice by any means necessary.

The road from Khordin to the distant Monastery of Embershroud twisted like an old scar across the highlands, carving its way through pine-strewn hills and rocky plateaus stained with lichen and frost. Bromrik rode not on horseback, but in a rickety, iron-braced wagon pulled by a stubborn grey mule named Krosh. The wagon, filled with modest supplies, a bedroll, and his wargear, creaked with every bump and dip, its wheels forever threatening to collapse under the weight of the iron-bound Inquisitor and his grim cargo.

For days, he traveled through harsh wind and stone-bitten silence. The road was near empty save for passing traders and the occasional pilgrim, whom Bromrik watched with narrow eyes as they passed, scrutinizing their tattoos, their amulets, the way they crossed themselves—or didn't. The faithful were never as faithful as they claimed, and Bromrik had long since trained his mind to suspect anyone who wore their piety too loosely. He grunted at pleasantries, offered curt nods, and kept his axe within arm's reach.

On the fourth night, as dusk spilled like oil across the sky, Bromrik reached a hamlet tucked into a wooded valley. A crooked sign announced the name of the tavern: "The Mug." Smoke rose from its chimney and the scent of meat stew drifted on the air like bait. Bromrik tied Krosh outside the stable and entered, his boots thudding on the floorboards. The tavern's patrons glanced up from their mugs and dice, suddenly quieter. He could feel their discomfort, their unease at the sight of his robes, the axe, the tome chained at his belt.

He sat in the corner, ordered porridge thick with barley, and two mugs of dark ale. As he ate, he watched the room like a hound watches a foxhole, eyes darting from face to face. Who here doubted the Flame? Who mocked it in private? He could almost smell it—the scent of

guilt, of hidden heresy. He puffed his pipe and frowned, letting the silence of his suspicion speak for him. Few dared meet his gaze. That was good.

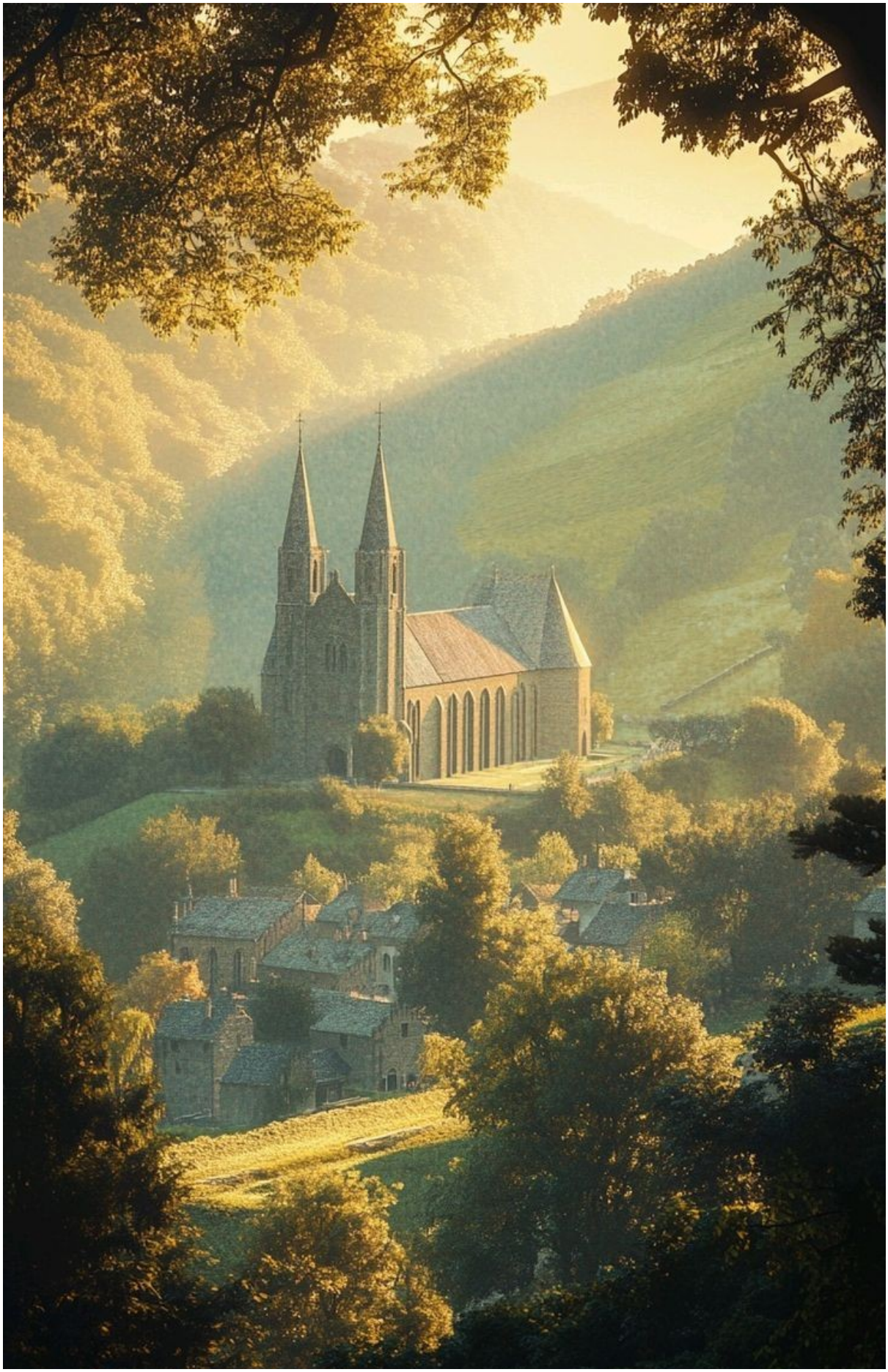
After finishing his meal, he tossed a pair of tarnished coins onto the table and asked for a room with a window facing the back. He preferred to sleep with walls around him when available, but more often than not, the road offered only grass and darkness. When no tavern presented itself, Bromrik would curl in the bed of his wagon beneath a wool blanket, the stars above hidden by drifting fog, axe across his chest and the smell of pipe smoke hanging in the cold air.

At dawn, he would rise stiffly, stepping into the dewy grass, shoulders hunched in the morning chill. He would uncork his waterskin, sip warm ale, and open the tome. Its pages were thick, scarred with centuries of oil, ash, and ink. He read aloud from it, voice low and reverent, each verse a hammerstroke of law. One passage made him grin beneath his beard: “The fire reveals all lies, and the ash makes no room for excuses.” He whispered it again, savoring the words like old wine. With pipe in teeth and ale warming his gut, Bromrik packed up his camp and returned to the road, the Monastery of Embershroud growing closer with each weary mile.

The towering spires of the Monastery of Embershroud rose from the cliffs like jagged fingers grasping at the sky, shrouded by drifting veils of mist that clung to its black-stone walls. Bromrik arrived at its iron gates just past noon, the sun a pale disc above the craggy landscape. The path leading up was lined with rune-carved stones, each bearing a passage from the Book of Flame, half-worn by rain and wind but still holy in his eyes. As the gates opened with a groan of age-old hinges, Bromrik dismounted from the wagon and let Krosh be taken by a novice stablehand in roughspun robes. He nodded, silent, his eyes already sweeping the compound.

Within, the monastery stirred with quiet purpose. Monks in coal-colored robes hauled stone and timber for the construction of a new inner wall, their chants echoing rhythmically with each strike of hammer on nail. Others worked the soil in the monastery garden—an orderly patch of green where cabbage, leeks, and bitterroot herbs grew in straight lines beneath hanging icons of the Sacred Flame. Bromrik watched them with a vague contentment. Monasteries pleased him. They carried the silence of discipline, the song of devotion, and the scent of candlewax and parchment. They were sanctuaries not only from sin, but from the world’s noise.

He passed through the central cloister where a group of nuns sang the Evening Psalm, their voices rising like smoke, ethereal and precise. Bromrik paused for a moment, eyes closed, letting the harmony run through him like an old memory. It reminded him of his younger years, when he too had worn the robe of the penitent. He remembered those long nights hunched over worn parchment, copying sacred texts by flickering candlelight. His fingers had grown stiff from ink and cold, but the act of transcribing scripture had always been its own prayer. He remembered kneeling on stone floors, the cold seeping into his bones as he whispered prayers to the Lord-Father, the divine flame that watched and judged all.



There had been transgressions too. He remembered one nun in particular—Sister Alenia—her voice soft as ash, her hands too warm. They had met often in the shadows between confession and silence, their shared guilt thick as incense. Bromrik had wept afterward, head bowed in the confession cell, fists clenched. “I am clay in the forge, unshaped,” he had whispered to the priest. “Make me worthy.” He believed the Lord-Father had forgiven him, though the memory still lingered like a scar.

Now he walked the halls with authority, his axe tapping against the stone with each step. The Head Prior, a tall man named Brother Ervan, greeted him in the inner hall with a bow and handed him a scroll bound in red wax. The monastery library, with its high arched ceilings and rows of tomes behind iron grilles, awaited him when his tasks allowed. Bromrik nodded silently, tucking the scroll into the folds of his cloak.

He was given a cell of his own to sleep in—a room of bare stone, a cot, a small table, and a candle. It was enough. That night, he sat alone by the candle, reading from his tome of law and whispering the words as if invoking a blessing. Outside, the chants of the monks faded into the darkness like the dying light of a forge. Bromrik smiled faintly, puffed on his pipe, and poured himself a sip of ale. It was good to be back within walls built by faith. But the peace would not last. The scroll burned in his pocket, and with it, the names of the accused awaited justice.

The morning air in the monastery was brisk, thin with the scent of dew and old stone. Bromrik rose early, as was his custom, kneeling before the small iron symbol of the Sacred Flame fixed to the wall of his cell. He whispered a prayer for clarity and strength, then donned his black robes and strapped his axe to his belt, the tome of law tucked firmly under one arm. The scroll, its red wax seal still unbroken, weighed heavy in his pocket as he made his way through the hushed cloisters toward the south wing, where the Inquisition chamber lay.

The chamber was built out of rough stone, its walls damp with ancient moisture and lined with shelves of parchment and ledgers. A single brazier burned in the center, casting flickering light onto the pale, thin face of Officer Mailik. He was an older man, gray-bearded and stooped, though his eyes were sharp and carried none of the kindness of age. He looked up as Bromrik entered and gestured to the seat across from him.

"Brother Stonemantle," Mailik said, folding his hands, "the Lord-Father calls for your service."

Bromrik nodded and reached into his cloak, retrieving the scroll. Without a word, he snapped the red wax seal with a thumb and unrolled the parchment. Twenty names were written in a firm, unwavering hand. Each name had a note beside it, written in the shorthand of the Inquisition. He began to read in silence.

Mailik leaned forward. "These are not mere sinners, Bromrik. These are wolves in the sheepfold. Thieves. Heretics. Apostates. Some have refused the faith outright. One man spat on the altar in Northgrove. Another was seen chanting in the old tongue by a stream during a

blood moon. One woman called the Lord-Father a false god. There are whispers of pagan altars hidden in their homes. Murderers, idol-breakers, whisperers of devil speech. There's a priest among them, disgraced. His hands red with sin."

Bromrik's eyes did not leave the scroll. "And what is the will of the Flame?"

Mailik's voice dropped. "You are to investigate each of them. Bring confession where possible. Justice where needed. The ones beyond saving must be returned to the ash. Publicly, if it can be done. Quietly, if it must. The church needs this purge seen through."

Bromrik looked up at him, pipe clamped in his teeth. "And their worldly goods?"

Mailik allowed himself a thin smile. "All that they own—livestock, homes, coin, contracts, slaves if they hold any—will be listed and submitted for conversion to the holy treasury. Their blasphemy must feed the faith. Let no silver rot in heretical hands."

Bromrik nodded slowly. "I'll tally what can be taken. If they've no coin, they'll pay in flesh. If they have coin, I'll bleed it out of them before the fire."

Mailik gave a slight nod. "Take what bribes are offered, if it brings us closer to the truth. But be sure to record everything. The Flame sees greed, even when the church benefits."

Bromrik rolled up the scroll and tucked it back into his cloak. "I'll leave at dawn. Krosh will carry me fast enough. And I'll send back the guilty in chains, or ash."

Mailik rose, placing a hand briefly on Bromrik's shoulder. "May the Sacred Flame guide your axe. And may you never hesitate in the face of sin."

"I don't," Bromrik answered simply.

As he turned to leave, the quiet voice of monks chanting rose faintly from the courtyard. It was a holy sound, pure and without question. But Bromrik's path now led into the mire, into the hearts of liars and betrayers. He was ready. The scroll was only the beginning.

Before he left the cold chamber of the Inquisition, Mailik reached into a locked chest behind his desk and retrieved a heavy leather pouch. The sound it made when placed on the table was unmistakable—coin. Mailik untied the cord and pushed it toward Bromrik without ceremony.

"Three hundred gold pieces," he said. "Taken as tax from the peasants of the southern parishes. It will cover your expenses—lodging, meals, bribes when needed. You will account for every copper of what remains when you return."

Bromrik took the pouch and tested its weight. "I'll spend it in the name of the Lord-Father, not in waste."

"That's what I expect," Mailik said, returning the chest to its place and locking it with a thick iron key. "May it grease the wheels of justice."

With business settled, Bromrik made his way to the monastery's dining hall, a long vaulted chamber that echoed with voices and the clatter of plates. The monks were already seated on wooden benches, heads bowed in prayer. He joined them, murmuring the verse of thanks before the meal began. That day's feast was a generous one—soft-cooked pork seasoned with wild herbs, roasted potatoes drizzled in salted butter, and fresh salad picked that morning from the monastery gardens. The wine was their own, brewed from the sunniest vineyard slopes behind the monastery walls. Its deep, dark red tasted of blackberry and oak.

Laughter stirred the air. Bromrik allowed himself a smile, even joined in a few low-voiced stories from his days as a young scribe. The wine loosened their tongues, and for a moment, the burden of judgment seemed far off. It was not often he laughed, but here in the company of old brothers, he felt some peace.

As the sun dipped low beyond the western hills, Bromrik stood, thanked the abbot, and made his way to the stable. Krosh the mule was waiting, stubborn as ever, snorting and stamping as if he already disapproved of the coming journey. Bromrik loaded the cart, strapped his gear tight, and climbed aboard. He cracked the reins with a grumble.

"Come on then, you cursed beast. We've names to chase."

The road wound through a forest painted in summer's full color. The trees arched above him, tall and noble, their leaves whispering with each gentle breeze. A stream ran alongside the path for much of the way, clear and glimmering in the sunlight. Birds darted between branches, and the air was cool and sweet with pine and moss.

Near midday, Bromrik stopped at a bend where the stream widened and slowed. He knelt at the water's edge, scooped fresh water into his second flask, and dipped his rough hands into the stream. He splashed his face, then scrubbed at his beard and neck, sighing deeply.

He closed his eyes and murmured a verse from the Tome. "Cleanse the flesh, that the soul may remain unsoiled. Water before fire, thought before steel."

He sat in silence for a while, the stream’s song blending with the wind. Then he puffed his pipe, took a slow sip of wine from his waterskin, and returned to the cart. The sun was tilting low again by the time the treeline gave way to open ground, and the fort came into view.

The structure was small, built of timber and stone, perched on a low hill overlooking the road. A wooden palisade surrounded it, and the red-and-gold banner of the church flew from the central tower. As Bromrik approached, a guard at the gate held up a hand.

“State your name and business.”

Bromrik held up his pendant, the sigil of the Inquisition dangling from its iron chain. “Bromrik Stonemantle. Inquisitor of the Sacred Flame. I carry the authority of the Lord-Father and the will of Embershroud.”

The guard straightened and stepped aside. “Aye, Inquisitor. You’re expected. The captain’s in the longhouse.”

Bromrik rode through the gate without another word, eyes already scanning the faces of those within. One of the names on the scroll belonged here. He would eat, rest, and then begin asking questions. The fire had arrived.

Bromrik sat alone in the guest room of the fort, the walls plain and wooden, lit by a single oil lamp swaying slightly in the draft that slipped through the cracks of the shutters. The room smelled of old straw, pitch, and worn leather. He puffed his pipe, the sweet smoke curling up into the rafters, and read a few pages from the tome that never left his side. The words soothed him, ancient phrases of judgment and purity. After a time, he closed the book with a quiet snap, set it down on the table, and signaled the guard waiting by the door.

"Bring in the stablehand," he said. "Mirtha."

A few minutes passed, and then the door creaked open. Mirtha was led in—young, her face pale and flushed, eyes wide with fear. She held her cap in her hands, wringing it nervously. Her boots were muddy, and her apron was stained with straw and horse sweat. The guard closed the door behind her without a word.

Bromrik didn’t rise. He leaned back in his chair, laid the tome open on the table before him, and poured himself a mug of wine from the clay jug beside him. He took a slow sip, watching her with flat eyes.

"Stand in the corner," he said coldly, pointing with the stem of his pipe. "Back to the wall. Don’t speak until I ask you to."

Mirtha obeyed, her boots scuffing against the floor as she shuffled nervously into the corner. Bromrik took another sip, then set the mug down and folded his hands over the tome.

"So let us begin," he said, voice low but clear. "When was the first time you denounced the Holy Lord-Father?"

Mirtha trembled, tears already forming at the corners of her eyes.

"I—I never did, father. I swear it. I never denounced him—"

He raised his hand.

"Did I say you could speak yet? I asked a question. Answer it properly. Have you gone years without praying, while claiming to do so? Do you lie in the shadow of the flame while your soul sleeps in filth?"

"No, no, I have prayed, only—only a few times I did not, when I was too tired and fell asleep after work, I didn't mean—"

"Unforgivable," Bromrik snapped, slamming the mug down on the table. "You do not rest unless the Lord-Father has given you the right. You sleep on His time. You breathe because He allows it. You wake because He wills it. You would let your soul drift into shadow because you were tired?"

She began to cry in earnest, her shoulders shaking.

"I—I meant no insult, I just—I didn't think it mattered if I missed once or twice—"

"You didn't think." Bromrik stood now, slowly, letting the weight of his presence fill the room. "That is the heart of heresy. Thoughtlessness. You are accused of viling the name of the Lord, of letting filth drip from your tongue when you should have spoken praise. You curse His name under your breath when the stables are cold and the horses bite, don't you?"

Mirtha shook her head violently. "No! I've never said anything like that!"

"You lie, even now." Bromrik stepped closer, voice like a blade. "You lie to my face and to the flame. Are you a pagan, Mirtha? Have you knelt before trees in the wood, whispered to stones and rivers? Speak it now, or it will be torn from your soul later."

"No, please—I'm not, I swear! I've never done that, never! I only work and try to be good, I try, I do!"

Bromrik stared at her, unmoved. He let silence stretch out until her sobs softened to whimpers.

"You will write a confession," he said. "You will list every time you failed to pray, every curse you spoke, every moment of doubt. You will kneel in the chapel for three nights without sleep, and fast. If the Lord-Father wills mercy, you may keep your soul. If not—"

He let the sentence hang.

"Y-yes, Inquisitor," she whispered. "I will. I will do all of that."

He turned away, returning to his seat and picking up his mug again.

"See that you do," he said, voice like cold iron. "Now go. And remember—He sees even what I do not."

The door opened, and Mirtha fled in silence. Bromrik sat back, drained the mug, and reopened the tome. The flame was never far.

Later that morning, Bromrik summoned Lord Eckhart to the guest chamber. The lord of the fort entered clad in a fine cloak of fur over chainmail, his hair streaked with gray but well-kept, his bearing proud though tempered with caution. He bowed respectfully as he approached.

"Inquisitor," he said, voice even, "you summoned me."

Bromrik remained seated at the heavy table, the tome still open before him. He tapped one finger on the parchment, eyes cold and direct.

"I have completed the first hearing concerning your stablehand, Mirtha," Bromrik began. "There has been a serious violation of the Lord-Father's sacred order within these walls. Mirtha has avoided prayer—consistently and without proper repentance. This is not merely personal failure; it is a crack in the spiritual integrity of your fort. Such things breed rot if left untended."

Lord Eckhart nodded slowly. "I understand, Father."

"Mirtha is to kneel in the chapel for three nights," Bromrik continued, "without sleep, in fasting and silence. That is only part of her penance. She will also be given thirty lashes with the whip. That should remind her body what her soul seems to have forgotten."

Eckhart's jaw tightened, but he nodded again. "If that is what justice demands."

"It is," Bromrik said firmly. "And further, as lord and keeper of this fort, you are responsible for the spiritual condition of all who dwell here. For this breach of faith, a fine of one hundred fifty gold pieces is to be paid to the Church of the Sacred Flame. In addition, a full wagon-load of wheat will be sent to the Monastery of Embershroud at dawn tomorrow. Our stores are in need, and it will be your tithe for failing to uphold the daily prayer enforcement."

Lord Eckhart lowered his gaze. "Yes, Father. Your requests shall be met without delay. I will personally see that Mirtha follows the prayers each day going forward."

Bromrik studied him for a moment, then gave a small nod of approval. "Good. May the Flame yet warm this place."

"If I may," Eckhart added, "I would be honored if you would remain for the midday meal. We have prepared a table fit for a servant of the Lord-Father. Please, take it as both apology and welcome."

Bromrik rose, brushing ash from his robe. "Show me, then."

They moved to the dining hall, where a great oaken table stretched beneath a hanging rack of dried herbs and garlic. The servants had laid out a rich spread: roasted duck glazed in honey and thyme, skewered venison with berries, a platter of soft cheese and dried figs, fresh black bread still steaming, and bowls of spiced root stew. There were grapes, sweet pears in wine sauce, and jugs of dark red and amber-colored wines from southern vineyards. Bromrik sat with his usual gravity but could not hide his satisfaction as the food was served.

"You show proper reverence," he said between mouthfuls of venison. "And good taste in wine. This vintage tastes of sun and discipline."

Eckhart chuckled lightly. "Only the best for the Inquisition, Father. We are honored to host you."

After the meal, Eckhart led Bromrik through the fort’s corridors, past the barracks and armory, until they reached the chapel. It was a modest but well-kept space, with polished

wooden benches, a stone altar, and a tall iron cross etched with holy runes. A single candle burned at its base.

Bromrik stepped in and immediately fell to one knee, bowing his head before the cross. His fingers touched the floor, and he began to whisper a passage from the Tome.

“Blessed is the flame that judges without doubt. Blessed is the fire that knows no fear.”

Eckhart hesitated only briefly before joining him, kneeling beside the Inquisitor, repeating the verse with quieter breath.

When the prayer ended, they both stood. Bromrik placed one hand on the altar and exhaled deeply.

"This chapel is clean," he said. "May it remain so. The Flame watches."

"I will see to it personally," said Lord Eckhart.

With the prayer done and justice set in motion, Bromrik knew his next interrogation awaited. The scroll still held many names. But for now, the fort held no further shadows—only debts repaid and fire rekindled.

The next morning, with the sun just beginning to rise behind a shroud of pale mist, Bromrik left the fort behind. His mule, Krosh, plodded down the winding dirt road at a maddening pace, hooves sinking occasionally into the soft ruts left by old cart wheels. Bromrik sat hunched in his seat on the wagon, his axe resting beside him, the tome closed but never far from hand. The road ahead curved through rolling hills and copses of tangled trees, silent but for the distant cries of crows and the groan of old wood.

More than once during the journey, Krosh came to a complete halt in the middle of the road, as though forgetting the purpose of travel altogether.

“By the scorched beard of the Flame!” Bromrik roared, striking the mule’s flank with the worn leather reins. “Move, you dull-eyed beast! The dead make better pace!”

Krosh snorted stubbornly, but eventually resumed his slow trudge. Bromrik cursed under his breath and lit his pipe, the bitter smoke calming his rising temper. The first day passed with fits of movement and long pauses, until just before sunset when the sign of a roadside tavern swung into view: **Dark Mead**, it read, with a crude image of a tankard carved beside it.

Inside, the tavern was dim and low-ceilinged, its beams blackened with smoke and age. A dozen travelers and locals sat in scattered silence, some hunched over mugs, others playing dice. Bromrik entered with the slow, heavy step of someone used to being noticed. The room fell into a tense quiet as he scanned the faces, his eyes sharp and judgmental.

No pagan here, he thought. Not one foolish enough to show it openly. Still, he kept watching.

He took a seat at a corner table and barked, “Food. Your best. And a dark ale. The tavern’s name better not lie.”

The serving maid nodded quickly and soon returned with a steaming plate of smoked sausage, cabbage, and stewed beans, along with a large mug of thick, almost-black ale. Bromrik drank it in one long pull, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and let out a rumbling belch that made the nearby table flinch.

“Good enough,” he muttered, rising to pay. He approached the bar and tossed a few silver coins to the tavern maid. “Room. Upstairs. Wake me at dawn and not a minute later.”

She nodded again, still avoiding his gaze.

In his chamber above, Bromrik knelt beside the simple bed, removed his axe, and opened his tome in the candle’s flickering glow. He murmured a short prayer.

“May the fire judge, and the flame reveal. May I never hesitate to bring wrath where it is owed.”

With that, he lay down, the pipe still clamped between his teeth until sleep took him.

Thornbarn

The next day was clearer, the air crisp as he resumed his journey toward Thornbarn. It was late morning when the village’s humble outline came into view—low cottages of wood and stone, thatched roofs, and fields of barley rustling in the breeze. Children scattered as he passed, staring wide-eyed at the black-robed dwarf with the heavy tome and the iron-etched axe.

He stopped in front of a modest house on the village’s edge and rapped on the door with the butt of his pipe. A middle-aged man with thick shoulders and a drawn face opened it, clearly startled.

“You Kundrig?” Bromrik asked, stepping forward without waiting for permission. “I am here in the name of the Sacred Flame. You are to be interrogated—accused of refusing the faith.”

Kundrig paled. “My… my wife and children—”

“Put them in the back room. They’ll keep.” Bromrik strode into the main room and sat heavily at the table, laying the tome down with a thump. “Stand, Kundrig. Now.”

The man obeyed, wringing his hands.

Bromrik opened the tome and cleared his throat. “So then. From what time did you think it proper to refuse the faith of our Lord-Father? When did you begin to believe yourself above His commandments?”

“I—I never meant—”

“Have you ever prayed? Ever knelt in reverence? Or are you some vilified pagan beast hiding behind your roof like the cowards who worship trees and whisper to shadows?”

“I—no! No, Father, I swear—I never took up with any pagans!”

“Is your whole family the same as you, then? Must I bring justice upon your son? Your daughter? Will I have to see them in chains?”

“No! No, please!” Kundrig stammered, nearly falling to his knees. “It’s not like that—our village has no priest. There’s no one to guide us.”

“That is no excuse!” Bromrik bellowed, slamming his fist on the table. “A man of faith does not wait for comfort or convenience! If you lacked a priest, you should have sought one. You should have traveled to a proper chapel and begged to be taught.”

“I can’t read,” Kundrig mumbled, shame in his voice. “I don’t even know the scriptures.”

Bromrik sneered. “That is *no excuse either.* A man who cannot read must find one who can. The Flame’s law is not bound by ignorance. You should know what our Order does with pagans—*they hang.* Or worse.”

Kundrig bowed his head, shaking. “Please… I’ll do whatever I must.”

Bromrik stared at him for a long moment, then closed the tome slowly.

“You’ll begin by writing a confession—or dictating it to someone who can. You’ll attend prayer at dawn and dusk every day. You’ll build a shrine in this village, and you’ll bring me three names of others who’ve neglected the Flame, before the week’s end. Fail that, and I’ll assume you're hiding them.”

Kundrig nodded frantically. “Yes, yes, I will, I swear it.”

“Good,” Bromrik said, rising and reaching for his axe. “Now bring me something hot to eat. I’ve got more souls to weigh, and your village is already heavy with doubt.”

And with that, judgment began its work in Thornbarn.

Kundrig returned to the main room of the house in a flurry of motion, beckoning his wife urgently. Together, they set about preparing the best meal they could offer—a bowl of warm cabbage and a thick porridge made from crushed wheat and salt, the family’s finest provisions. They placed it before Bromrik with trembling hands, and he wasted no time, digging into the food with single-minded purpose. The porridge clung to his beard as he chewed noisily, chasing each bite with gulps of homemade ale from a cracked wooden mug.

He belched loudly when the bowl was clean. “Not terrible,” he grunted. “Though you should salt the cabbage sooner in the boil. But I’ve eaten worse in finer houses.”

As Bromrik wiped his beard with the sleeve of his robe, Kundrig stepped forward, sweat still on his brow. “Inquisitor… I’ve remembered some names. Three villagers who once

registered at the chapel but haven't been seen there in moons. They… they've turned from the Flame, Father."

Bromrik leaned forward. "Names."

"Mathen, son of Jorek. Elda the herbwoman. And Fendril, a hunter who lives on the edge of the forest. All three were once listed in the register. They know the rules."

"Fetch them," Bromrik said darkly, standing from the table and brushing crumbs from his robe. "Now."

Within the hour, the three had arrived at Kundrig's house. They entered hesitantly, eyes downcast, the weight of fear already settling in the room. Mathen was a wiry man with sun-cracked skin, Elda a hunched, middle-aged woman with hands stained green from herbs, and Fendril, a broad-shouldered man with a bow still slung across his back.

Bromrik stood by the table, the tome open before him. His eyes were cold as steel as he gestured for silence.

"You three were once listed in the house of God. You stepped into the sacred walls, had your names recorded in the great register of souls, and now you dare to ignore your calling? Why did you stop attending? Speak."

Elda answered, her voice thin. "We… we didn't know it was required. We thought… thought it was just a blessing, not a command…"

"Obligatory?" Bromrik snarled. "You think your loyalty to the Lord-Father is a matter of your choosing? Is the holy flame a suggestion? Do you think faith is to be worn like a cloak in winter and cast off in summer?"

Mathen tried to speak. "We meant no offense—"

Before he could continue, Kundrig stepped in, voice taut with anxiety. "I—I saw one of them, Inquisitor. I saw Fendril go into the forest. He knelt by the stones. I couldn't hear him, but he was mumbling. Mumbling like he was praying… to the trees."

Bromrik turned to Fendril slowly, fire beginning to rise behind his eyes. "Is this true? Is this how you honor the Flame? You go to worship stones and trees like the savage wretches in the wild lands?"

Fendril looked stunned, pale as parchment. "No, I—it's not worship—it's just… the forest gives us game, herbs, shelter. We… we thank it, that's all."

"You thank it?" Bromrik growled, stepping closer. "It is not the forest that gives. It is the Lord-Father who made the forest. It is He who allows the stag to cross your path, not some whispering branch. You deny Him, and thank mud and root instead?"

He stepped back and flipped through his tome until he found the passage he sought, reading aloud with grim satisfaction.

“‘Those who offer praise to creation and not the Creator are apostate, and shall be cut from the world as rot from the vine. Their tongues are unclean, and their breath blasphemous. Let their blood remind others that the Flame watches.’”

He snapped the book shut. “By the authority of the Inquisition and the will of the Sacred Flame, you are found guilty of paganism, of willful heresy, and of defiling the divine order. Your sentence is death by beheading. Today.”

All three broke into panicked pleas at once. Elda fell to her knees. “Please, Father, we didn’t know! Have mercy, we can pray! We’ll return to the chapel, I swear!”

Bromrik didn’t flinch. “You had your chance.”

He turned to Kundrig. “Fetch a wooden block. Now.”

Kundrig, trembling, did as he was told. He placed a thick chopping block outside his home, as villagers began to gather, drawn by the rising tension and shouted voices. Bromrik dragged Mathen by the collar to the block and forced him to his knees. Mathen tried to resist, but Bromrik delivered a sharp kick to the back of his leg, sending him down hard.

“May the Flame judge your soul,” he said flatly.

With one clean, brutal motion, Bromrik swung his axe. The blade struck with a sickening thud. Mathen’s body fell sideways, still twitching.

Elda screamed. Fendril tried to run, but the gathered villagers seized him and dragged him forward. Bromrik executed them both in the same grim fashion—cold, efficient, silent when his axe fell.

When the last body slumped beside the block, Bromrik turned to Kundrig. His beard was streaked with blood, his eyes unreadable.

“You will attend prayers at dawn and dusk, every day. You will build a shrine in the center of this village by the week’s end. If not, your whole house will join them in the soil.”

Kundrig nodded frantically, eyes wide, face pale as ash. “Yes, Inquisitor. It will be done. I swear it.”

“See that it is,” Bromrik said, wiping the blade of his axe with a rag. “The Flame does not forget. And neither do I.”

And with that, Bromrik returned to his cart, leaving three headless bodies behind and the village of Thornbarn echoing with the silence of fear.

The sixth day of travel brought Bromrik through a land of golden fields and quiet woods, where the road ran straight like a blade across the hills. Krosh the mule trudged on with the usual stubbornness, and more than once stopped in the middle of the road to rest without reason. Bromrik cursed under his breath, flicked the reins, and when that failed, struck the beast’s flank with the flat of his hand.

“Move, you loaf-headed curse of the soil,” he growled. “The road’s not going to burn itself.”

They camped at night beneath the stars, Bromrik curled in the bed of his wagon, smoke from his pipe trailing upward like prayer. He read his tome by the light of an oil lantern, the leather pages heavy with scripture. The journey was long, but he knew Minas was drawing nearer.

On the evening of the seventh day, he reached the tavern known as the White Swan, a well-kept inn of whitewashed stone and green shutters nestled by a stream that trickled between mossy stones. It stood alone at a crossroads, a stopping point for pilgrims and merchants making the same journey eastward.

Inside, the tavern was warm with the scent of cooked meat and spiced wine. The walls were hung with old pennants and polished shields, and the hearth burned bright. Bromrik entered with the weight of road dust on his shoulders and the black tome under his arm. He stepped to the counter and barked his order.

“I’ll have your best food. I want duck—soft, not dry. Roasted cabbage, red sauce, fresh greens, and a bottle of dark grape wine. No vinegar water. And a quiet table.”

The tavern maid, startled but quick to nod, gestured him to a table near the corner. As he settled in and unbuckled the strap on his axe, a figure at the next table turned her head.

An elf woman—tall, fair, red-haired and in leather armor—sat alone with a half-finished cup. Her features were calm, her eyes distant but aware. Bromrik met her gaze, curious.

“Didn’t expect to see an elf this far from the green cities,” he muttered. “Even less one not dressed in armor or singing to trees.”

She smiled faintly. “Not all of us wear leaves and chant to the wind. Some of us remember who made the wind.”

Bromrik raised a brow. “You speak of the Lord-Father?”

She set her cup down. “Light of the Holy Flame, guide my soul and judge me whole. Let no shadow cling to me, and let fire make me pure.”

Bromrik gave a single grunt of approval. “Good. I was just about to think I’d have to burn this place to the ground.”

The food arrived—succulent duck glazed in honeyed herbs, cabbage roasted to tenderness, salad with red leaf and olive oil, and a bottle of thick, dark wine from the southern vineyards. Bromrik ate heartily, grease running into his beard, and drank deep. He leaned back and let out a satisfied belch, patting his stomach.

“You speak well, elf,” he said, glancing to her. “What’s your name?”

“Isolda,” she replied. “Of no noble house, no grand line. Just a traveler who remembers her faith.”

He nodded, pleased. “Bromrik Stonemantle. Inquisitor. If you know heretics in these parts, now’s the time to speak it.”

She shook her head. “None I’ve met. This road is quiet, and I stay to myself. I keep my prayer and don’t ask questions I don’t want answers to.”

They talked a while longer. There was something easy in the silence between them. Bromrik, for all his roughness, felt something soften slightly in her presence—a rare feeling, but not unwelcome.

At last, he leaned forward, voice low. “It’s been long since I shared a prayer with someone who knew the words. Come with me upstairs. Let us offer a prayer together tonight. It’s a good thing, to kneel beside someone in faith.”

Isolda hesitated, eyes searching his face. Then she nodded once. “Very well.”

In the room above, candlelight flickered gently against the wood-panelled walls. They knelt beside the simple cot. Bromrik opened the tome and read a short verse:

“O Flame of Judgment, burn away pride and guilt. Make clean that which is flawed. Let no sin be hidden from Your light.”

Isolda whispered her own reply: “Flame eternal, hold my soul in Your warmth, not for comfort, but for truth.”

When the prayer was done, the quiet between them deepened. Bromrik turned to her, not with force but with need. She seemed surprised as he reached for her breasts, uncertain—but she

did not pull away. What followed was fierce and human, a moment not ruled by doctrine, but shared solace. She remained with him for a time, and then rose quietly, dressed, and left with a faint smile.

Bromrik sat alone, then turned once more to the cross on the wall. He knelt and spoke softly.

“Lord-Father… my flesh is weak. Forgive me. I carry Your justice, but my heart… I am still only a man.”

He prayed long and deeply, then poured himself another cup of wine, relit his pipe, and sat watching the flame flicker in the lantern, the road to Minas waiting beyond the next dawn.

The morning sun climbed mercilessly into the sky, beating down on Bromrik as he hoisted himself onto the wagon. He grunted with effort—his once battle-hardened frame now padded with the evidence of fine meals and full wineskins. His stomach strained against the buckle of his robes, and sweat already soaked through the fabric beneath his arms. With a wheeze, he took up the reins and smacked them against Krosh’s back.

Minas

“Move, you damned beast. Minas waits, and the guilty do not hang themselves.”

Krosh groaned and lurched into motion. Bromrik took a long gulp from his wineskin, wiped his forehead with his sleeve, and lit his pipe with a flint, puffing steadily as the city’s spires rose from the horizon like a jagged crown.

By nightfall they reached the outer edges of Minas, the city’s grandeur fading into slums of broken cobble, leaning shacks, and rusted gates. The streets grew narrower, more twisted. Bromrik rolled through the mire of everyday filth, coughing at the stench and mumbling curses as he pulled the scroll from inside his cloak.

“Let’s see what miserable worm awaits first…” he muttered, eyes scanning the names. “Mili of Southwell Street. Thief, cross-spitter. Faithless and shameless, I’ll wager.”

The wagon creaked to a halt in front of a crumbling house wedged between a smithy and an abandoned bakery. He stepped down, thudding into the dirt with a grunt, and stomped up to the door. His knock was not a request, but a warning.

When the door opened, a thin young woman with unkempt brown hair stood before him. Her eyes were wide with confusion and fear.

“Mili?” Bromrik asked, already pushing past the doorframe.

“Y—yes—”

“I am Bromrik Stonemantle. Inquisitor of the Sacred Flame. You are under formal investigation by the Church of Minas. Sit.”

Mili backed away, nearly tripping over a stool, and lowered herself onto it, trembling.

Bromrik placed the scroll and the tome on the table with a heavy thud. “You are accused of recurring thefts from the market stalls and, more gravely, of desecrating the holy cross in the eastern chapel by spitting upon it. What say you in your defense?”

She shook her head rapidly, voice trembling. “I—I haven’t done those things… I mean, once… I took a loaf of bread. I was starving, I hadn’t eaten in two days, my lord…”

“So you admit to theft.” Bromrik’s voice was flat, unmoved. “And I suspect that was not the first loaf.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I didn’t dare ask. No one helps beggars in this quarter. They’d sooner kick me than feed me.”

Bromrik leaned in, voice low and firm. “You have little faith in the goodness of the Lord-Father, girl. He provides to those who seek Him, not those who take without blessing. To steal is to deny His mercy. To defile the cross is to spit on His grace.”

“I didn’t spit, I swear,” she cried. “I was in the chapel—I sneezed, that was all!”

Bromrik opened the tome and read aloud in solemn tones: “For the theft of bread and the desecration of sacred symbols, punishment shall range from the forfeiture of limb to death, as determined by the servant of the Flame.”

He paused, watching her closely. “Mercy is not owed. It is given only when earned.”

She began to plead again, but his face did not soften.

“Your left hand,” he said coldly.

“No—please—”

“Left hand. Now.”

Trembling, pale, and near fainting, she laid her hand upon the edge of the table. Bromrik raised the axe—not with anger, not with haste, but with the steady purpose of ritual. A single, precise motion followed chopping Mili`s hand off with a wet crack.

She screamed. The sound rang through the walls, the alley, the city’s choking air. Bromrik offered her a strip of linen and a bowl of clean water from her kitchen table.

“Wrap it. Pray. If you survive the night, it means He still has work for you.”

Bromrik remained in the dim confines of Mili’s shabby house, the room heavy with her sobs and the scent of sweat and blood. He leaned on the table for a moment, letting the sound of her pain settle in the air like incense. Then he straightened, his voice sharp and deliberate.

“The church demands not only blood but repentance, girl,” he said, eyes narrowing. “What do you have to offer the Holy Lord-Father in return for your pitiful life? What coin, what treasure, what worth?”

Mili, still cradling the stump of her left arm wrapped hastily in the linen he had given her, shook her head, pale and shaking.

“I have nothing,” she whispered. “I swear it, I barely eat. I survive day to day. There's nothing.”

Bromrik frowned and slowly stepped away from the table, glancing around the room with a long, suspicious gaze.

“Then you won’t mind if I look, will you?” he muttered, drawing his dagger.

He began with the drawers—pulling them open and dumping their contents onto the floor. He kicked open a small chest in the corner, scattered old rags and sewing threads. Mili sat silent,

watching with hollow eyes as Bromrik tore her home apart, upending stools, shifting crates, even yanking curtains from the windows.

Then he dropped to his knees and began to pry at the floorboards. With the flat of his dagger and the weight of his arm, he worked one board loose. It gave with a crack, and underneath lay a small hidden space. His eyes gleamed as he reached inside.

From the hollow, he drew out three silver goblets engraved with the marks of the eastern chapels—altar pieces. Alongside them lay a golden necklace coiled like a serpent, and a leather pouch heavy with coin. He untied it and counted quickly.

“Fifty silver. Thirty gold.”

He turned slowly, rage building in the pit of his chest like a furnace.

“Poor, are we?” he spat.

He marched over to Mili and struck her across the face with the back of his hand. She fell to the ground with a choked cry, blood pouring from her nose.

“What is this?” he roared. “You’ve not only stolen from merchants, you’ve stolen from the temples? You’ve taken what is holy and buried it beneath your floor like a rat hoarding grain!”

Mili sobbed, hands trembling as she shielded her head.

“Please, Lord… I had to make a living somehow. I didn’t know where else to turn—”

“You lie, you steal, and then you dare desecrate the cross,” Bromrik growled. “I should have taken your head. But no—your treasures now belong to the church. All of it is forfeit.”

He shoved the goblets, necklace, and pouch into a cloth sack and slung it over his shoulder.

“If I hear of you stealing again, you’ll lose your other hand. And if the Lord-Father shows no more mercy in you, your life too. Pray your soul is still worth saving.”

Mili was left on the floor in tears as Bromrik exited the house, climbed into his wagon with a heavy grunt, and cracked the reins. Krosh trotted down the cobbled street as the sun sank into the haze above Minas.

Later that evening, Bromrik arrived at the great stone steps of the Church of Minas, its twin bell towers rising above the city like watchful eyes. Inside, the air was thick with incense, the shadows long and gold-lit.

He marched into the rectory, sack slung over his shoulder, and found Head Monk Piril writing by candlelight at a wide table.

Without a word, Bromrik dropped the sack before him with a dull thud. The goblets clanged together. Piril looked up, then opened the sack and studied the contents.

“This is what I found in that thieving pagan rat’s hole,” Bromrik said. “Desecration, theft, and lies—all hidden under her floor.”

Piril nodded slowly, his expression grave but tinged with satisfaction. He took the treasures and added them to a massive oak chest that sat behind his desk, already filled with coins, goblets, necklaces, rings, and precious stones—tributes gathered from the faithful and the condemned alike.

“You serve well, Inquisitor,” Piril said as he closed the lid and locked the chest. “Your work is respected by the Church. Your vigilance upholds the Sacred Flame. We are ever thankful.”

Bromrik grunted, wiping sweat from his brow. “Justice done. The Lord sees all.”

Piril gestured toward the hallway. “Will your lordship join us in prayer and meal? The table is set. The wine is from the southern slopes, and the fowl is rich this year.”

Bromrik nodded. “Aye. I’ve earned it.”

The two men entered the stone-vaulted dining hall where a dozen other clerics had already gathered. They stood in silence as Piril led the prayer.

“Flame that sees, judge what hides. Purge us of weakness, and let no greed go unrewarded.”

Then they sat, and the meal began. Roasted meats, boiled potatoes with herbs, thick loaves of dark bread, wheels of soft cheese, and stewed onions covered the table. Goblets overflowed with wine and ale. They ate like beasts—grunting, chewing, toasting, and laughing with mouths full.

Bromrik drank deep and often, grease glistening on his beard, pipe smoke curling toward the high beams above. Tomorrow, the hunt would begin anew. Tonight, there was fire, food, and the righteous weight of gold hard-earned.

The next morning, with the city of Minas fully awake and teeming, Bromrik steered his wagon through the arched gates of the nobles’ quarter, past rows of polished stone manors and manicured gardens. Krosh snorted at the polished streets, seemingly unimpressed, but Bromrik grinned beneath his beard. Here the coin clinked louder, and the comfort was sweeter.

He pulled up in front of the Gilded Rose, the finest tavern in the quarter, its sign shaped like a blossoming gold leaf, swinging gently in the breeze. Two porters emerged to take his mule to the stables, and Bromrik stepped down with a groan, his robes still streaked with dust, his beard stiff with travel.

“I’ll have your best room,” he grunted to the innkeeper. “And the bath made ready. Hot stones, not lukewarm muck.”

The staff obliged quickly. Before long, Bromrik lowered himself into a deep stone bath behind the tavern, steam rising around him like a spirit. He groaned as the hot water soaked

into his limbs, easing the tightness in his shoulders and washing away the grime of judgment and miles. He scrubbed his arms, chest, and neck, watching the filth of the road swirl into the water.

When he emerged, red-skinned and content, he dressed in a fresh tunic and dark robes, and made his way down to the tavern’s grand hall. Musicians played softly in the corner, and servants moved silently with trays of gilded dishes. Bromrik seated himself near the hearth and waved a hand.

“Chicken. Roasted with skin soft as cloud, and whatever special sauce your cook keeps locked in his soul. Salad with dark greens. And wine. Good wine. House special. A tall bottle.”

The meal was brought, steaming and seasoned to perfection. The sauce had a touch of cinnamon and honey, and the wine was thick and dark with a scent of plum and smoke. Bromrik ate slowly, deliberately, savoring each bite. Then he reached into his cloak and withdrew the black tome, setting it open beside his plate.

He read aloud in a low murmur: “Let the wicked call to shadows, and let the Flame be their answer. For the Flame sees not in light alone, but in guilt, in silence, in the place where men hide. And it shall burn there.”

He closed the tome and sipped his wine again, the fire warm in his belly. Later, he retired to his noble room—thick carpets, feather bed, silk curtains—more luxury than he'd known in weeks. He knelt before the iron cross nailed above the bed, bowed his head, and prayed in solemn whisper.

"Lord-Father, keep me your tool. My flesh is weak but my purpose firm. Let my dreams not tempt me from duty."

Then he lay down and slept long and deep, undisturbed.

He remained in the Gilded Rose for several days. He ate well, drank deeply, and let the weight of his task ease for a time. On the third day, as the sun fell behind the towers, a halfling woman came to his room bearing oils and a soft cloth. Without a word, she knelt at his feet and began to work—massaging his aching soles and calves, rubbing in lavender and rose oil until the room was filled with their sweet perfume.

Bromrik exhaled and leaned back. "Splendid," he rumbled, eyes half-lidded. "You've got hands like warm velvet." He reached into his pouch and handed her a silver coin. "For the road."

She bowed gracefully. "Thank you, Master Inquisitor."

When he had rested enough and his limbs felt strong again, Bromrik packed his gear, filled his waterskin and wineskin, and descended the steps of the tavern one last time.

Outside the city walls, he climbed onto his wagon, cracked the reins, and Krosh began their journey anew. The road stretched into rolling meadows and quiet valleys, the hills lit in gold beneath a wide summer sky. Birds flitted across the path, and a soft wind stirred the grass. Bromrik lit his pipe and sat tall, a rare contentment glowing in his chest.

"I can smell it," he muttered to himself. "Sin, just over that next hill. And I'll be the one to catch it."

As the sun dipped low, he pulled the wagon off the road and made camp beside a small grove. He lay in the cart beneath his thick blanket, gulped a generous swig of wine until the stars swirled a little, and puffed his pipe with slow satisfaction.

The night was calm, the earth quiet. But Bromrik's dreams were heavy with fire, shadow, and the ever-hungry eyes of the Lord-Father watching from beyond the smoke.

Morning came with a cool mist rolling off the grass and settling on Bromrik's beard like dew on moss. He stirred in the wagon, groaning as he sat upright and reached for his pipe. But before he struck flint, he bowed his head and placed both hands on the black tome resting on his lap.

"Lord-Father," he murmured, voice rough with sleep, "judge my path today as You judged the unworthy yesterday. Let my axe find your will in the flesh of the faithless."

He poured a bit of water from his skin into his palm, splashed it over his face, and shook off the chill. The sun barely crested the trees as he guided Krosh toward a forest path lined with tangled roots and thick brush. The road narrowed, the trees pressing in like silent sentinels. The cart groaned beneath the weight of justice and gear, and the ground underfoot grew darker, wetter, muddier.

After several hours of steady progress, the wheel hit something deep. A loud squelch echoed through the forest, followed by a sharp jerk forward as the cart lurched and sank.

“Don’t you bloody dare,” Bromrik muttered, leaning to one side.

The back wheel was embedded deep in a patch of wet, clinging mud near a low-lying forest lake, thick with green algae and mist curling just above the surface. The trees around the lake leaned at odd angles, roots half-sunken, moss like torn skin draped over bark.

Bromrik climbed down with a heavy grunt, boots sinking slightly with every step.

“Curse this wretched earth,” he growled, rolling up his sleeves. “Curse your four hooves, Krosh. Curse every tree and root from here to the bleeding sun.”

He dropped to his knees and began scooping mud from around the wheel with both hands, tossing great clumps aside, cursing louder with every handful. The wheel remained stuck. The mule, indifferent, stared ahead blankly.

Bromrik stood and braced his back against the cart, planting both boots deep and began to push.

“Move, you wooden coffin! MOVE, DAMN YOU!”

He shouted until his voice cracked. Sweat poured from his brow, his arms ached, and the cart refused to budge. He staggered back, chest heaving. Just then, a sound reached his ears—a low, wet slither. At first faint, then louder. Something unnatural.

Bromrik turned his head toward the lake.

From the brackish water, a creature rose.

It slithered in long, undulating folds—maggot-like, but the size of a full-grown hound. Its pale, pus-colored skin glistened with filth and rot, and its many moist rings contracted and expanded with each movement. A wide, puckered mouth lined with circular rows of fleshy, grasping folds and a row of sharp teeth.

Bromrik stepped back.

“In the name of the Holy Father,” he shouted, grabbing his axe from the cart, “what kind of *shithole* does an abomination like *you* crawl out of?!”

The creature lunged with terrifying speed, mouth unhinging wide enough to suck Bromrik’s leg to the knee in one horrific pull. Acidic slime that began to eat through his pants, sizzling

as it seared into flesh. He screamed and hacked at the thing with his axe, but its body was tough, elastic, resistant.

The pain in his leg was unbearable. He dropped to the ground, gripping the shaft of the axe with both hands and swinging again and again. The maggot tried to drag him toward the lake, but his weight and the mule's tied reins kept him grounded. Then it reared up and slammed its full mass down on him, its weight crushing the wind from his lungs. It tried to engulf him completely.

Bromrik roared.

He drove his axe deep into the thing's side, twisted it, and with a final howl of fury, cleaved a path through its slick flesh. The creature convulsed. Acid sprayed from the wound and burned his sleeves and beard. He rolled aside just as it collapsed beside him, twitching and oozing black-green ichor.

Panting, his leg scorched and torn, Bromrik sat in the mud, covered in slime and blood, one hand still gripping the axe, the other trembling as he reached for his pipe.

He lit it with shaking fingers, dragged deep, then looked at the twitching corpse.

"Spit of the abyss," he muttered. "Should've stayed in the damn tavern."

Then he spat, prayed under his breath, and set to bandaging the wound with whatever linen hadn't been eaten by the creature's slime. The cart was still stuck, but for now, the danger had passed. And Bromrik—bruised, bloodied, burned—was still breathing. That was enough. For now.

Two more hours passed in miserable labor. Bromrik's arms were caked with mud up to the elbows, his beard stuck with flecks of slime, sweat streaming down his face in rivulets. He dug, pushed, cursed, prayed, and pushed again—but the cart held firm in the clinging swamp of the lake's edge like it had roots in the underworld.

With fury boiling to the surface, Bromrik grabbed the whip hanging from the front of the cart, stormed around to Krosh, and cracked it hard against the mule's flank.

"MOVE, you four-legged disgrace!"

The mule brayed in pain, stomping and bucking as Bromrik whipped again and again, raw anger pouring out of him with each strike. Krosh shrieked and yanked violently forward, the harness groaning as the cart lurched, slid, then broke free from the mud with a violent jolt. The cart nearly toppled and Krosh bolted ahead, dragging it like a beast possessed.

"STOP, you son of a mule!" Bromrik bellowed, limping forward, his bandaged leg throbbing, beard flying. He clambered up onto the moving cart with a grunt and seized the reins, wrenching them back until Krosh slowed to a trembling halt.

The forest road opened again before them, and Bromrik slumped down, chest heaving. After a moment, he pulled out his wineskin, uncorked it, and drank deeply. The wine hit his gut like fire, warm and sweet, and he let out a long breath, then began whistling a whirling tune, low and sharp, an old dwarven song meant to cheer soldiers between battles.

Forest Monastery

He whistled as the cart rolled deeper into the woods, the scent of pine and fern strong around him. Three hours passed beneath the rustling green canopy until, finally, stone walls peeked through the trees. A small bell tower rose above a slope, wrapped in ivy and old smoke. Bromrik's destination stood quiet—Springsparrow Shire's forest monastery, a modest but respected seat of faith that served the outlying farms and gathered their coin for the Church of the Sacred Flame.

He pulled up the cart before the gate, jumped down with a grunt, and limped up the short steps. Inside, the hallway smelled of incense and baking bread. He followed the sound of utensils and conversation to a small, candle-lit chamber where Father Danarius sat behind a worn wooden table, chewing slowly on a piece of soft bread, a bowl of thick stew before him. He was fat and round as a barrel, with a bald patch shining atop his head, black robes spread like a tent around him.

Danarius looked up and laughed through his chewing. "Brother Bromrik! Flame preserve us—you look like you wrestled the dirt itself! What happened to your robes, good lord?"

Bromrik dropped heavily into a chair and wiped his brow. "Got stuck in a swamp just past a lake. The mule was no help—stubborn as a heretic. Took a full hour of digging and

screaming to move the cart. And to make it better, I came across an abomination. A maggot-thing, bigger than a man. Crawled out of the lake and nearly devoured my leg. Gods, Danarius, its spit burned like lye. It tried to crush me with its weight. I've still got the stink on me."

Danarius dropped his spoon, eyes wide. "By the Holy Lord… A beast like that? In these woods?"

Bromrik nodded, leaning closer. "It was no beast of flesh alone. That was something born of blasphemy. A thing twisted in the womb of the wild. But the Flame saw me through. Gave me strength, guided my hand. Another day alive to bring His will upon this cursed world."

Danarius crossed himself with the sign of the flame and bowed his head. "The Lord watches over you, Brother. As He should, for your work is His."

Then, clapping his hands, Danarius called to the hallway, "Sister Halta! Bring Brother Bromrik clean robes—something that hasn't seen the laundry heap in a fortnight. And see that his garments are washed until they shine like heaven's gate!"

A moment later, a quiet, stooped nun entered and handed Bromrik a folded set of fresh robes. He nodded his thanks, peeled off his grime-soaked clothing, and handed them over without shame.

Danarius gestured to the table. "Now, eat with me. This stew has been simmering since morning, and the bread was baked with basil and garlic from our own garden."

Bromrik sat again, now in fresh linen, and accepted the steaming bowl. He dipped bread, tore meat, and ate in heavy, satisfied bites. The food was hot, rich, and heavy—exactly what his bones needed. They said a quick prayer before the meal, and then silence gave way to the sound of eating, drinking, and the occasional satisfied grunt.

Another fire had been faced. Another mile walked. Another heretic, somewhere, was waiting.

But for now, Bromrik ate. And the Flame burned quietly in his chest.

Evening had descended fully over the forest monastery, the outside world wrapped in shadow and silence. Inside the dining room, only two men remained seated at the long wooden table—Bromrik, now cleaned and robed in fresh black linen, and Father Danarius, still round-faced and gleaming with sweat and satisfaction from their meal. The air was thick with the smell of stew and candlewax, and the embers in the hearth behind them crackled lazily.

Danarius leaned back with a satisfied sigh, rubbing his stomach as he reached for the clay wine jug between them. He filled both their cups and raised his in a quiet toast.

"To the Sacred Flame," he said. "And those who carry it into the dark."

Bromrik raised his own goblet, eyes steady. "To judgment."

They drank. After a moment of silence, Danarius chuckled softly. "So tell me, Brother Bromrik, what do they say now at Embershroud? I hear the High Purifier has grown stricter in doctrine—some whisper even the scholars are now expected to wield axe or flame."

Bromrik nodded slowly, placing his cup down. "He believes, as do I, that knowledge without action is vanity. A monk who knows the law but refuses to enforce it is like a candle under a bucket—useless in the dark. Embershroud has changed. The old softness is being burned out, and what's left is tempered steel. The scribes still copy the holy verses, but they also carry chains now. The Lord-Father's word must not only be known. It must be executed."

Danarius gave a small nod, stroking the curve of his chin. "Mm. A harsh truth, but needed. Too long we relied on words alone. And now? The heretics spread faster than plague. They mock us with riddles, twist the scripture with cleverness, and call it freedom of thought."

"The Path of the Sacred Flame was never a path for freedom," Bromrik said, leaning forward. "It's a path for discipline. For burning away weakness. Do you remember the saying? 'Where the tongue wanders, the flame shall follow.' That's from the Fourth Scroll."

Danarius's eyes lit up with recognition. "Yes… and followed by, 'For words are the first betrayal of the heart's loyalty.' One of my favorites. My students find it hard to accept."

"They would," Bromrik said, scoffing lightly. "They want the faith to feel good. They want comfort, like a warm bowl of porridge and a hymn. But the faith isn't food. It's fire. It burns. It *hurts*. And it must hurt. Otherwise it does nothing."

Danarius sighed deeply, his jovial tone dimming. "And yet, Brother, it is hard not to wish for peace. I watch the younger monks here, still fresh, barely able to lift a bucket, let alone an axe. I see them struggle with the idea that their prayers must be backed with punishment. They think mercy is the heart of our doctrine."

"They forget mercy is a *gift*," Bromrik replied. "Not a rule. And gifts are not owed to the undeserving. The Lord-Father is merciful, yes—but His mercy ends where rebellion begins."

Danarius looked into the flame behind Bromrik for a long moment, the dancing light reflecting in his tired eyes. “And what of the children, the beggars, the ones too ignorant to know their sins? What of those who are not taught, only punished?”

Bromrik’s brow lowered. “All men are taught. By the land, by hunger, by fear. The Flame speaks through suffering as well as scripture. Those who listen shall learn. Those who don’t…” He paused, then added, “I’ve taken hands, Danarius. Eyes. Even tongues. Not because I want to. But because the law is clear. If we do not act, we betray the Flame.”

Danarius raised his cup again, slowly. “May we never betray it.”

“May it never abandon us,” Bromrik replied, tapping his goblet against the priest’s.

They drank again, and in the glow of firelight and candle flame, the two servants of the Sacred Flame settled deeper into a long and grave conversation—one built on conviction, on memory, and on the heavy burden of judgment.

The wine flowed slowly, and the candles burned low. Outside the monastery walls, the forest whispered in wind and shadow, but within the quiet chamber, Bromrik and Danarius sat cloaked in faith and firelight. The food was finished, and their conversation had grown darker, more precise, drawn into the gravity of doctrine.

Danarius folded his hands over his round belly and looked across the table. “Do you recall the Third Book of Punishment? The part where it says: ‘The root of heresy is comfort, and the leaf is disobedience’? I always found it curious that it begins with the root. Not the act, but the craving.”

Bromrik grunted, nodding. “It’s deliberate. The scripture doesn’t waste breath on accidents. Heresy begins long before the words are spoken or the laws are broken. It begins when a man desires what the Flame forbids—ease without prayer, love without purity, life without order.”

Danarius took a long sip of wine. “I saw it once. A boy, no older than ten, at a village on the western border. His parents taught him nothing. He played in the fields, mimicked the chants, but never knew the words. When he was questioned, he laughed. Said the Flame was ‘just a story.’”

Bromrik leaned forward. “What happened?”

“I gave him over to the Brothers of Correction,” Danarius said. “They taught him what it meant to feel fire, not just hear of it. I wept for it. But after three weeks, he could recite every passage of the First Book.”

“That,” Bromrik said, “is the Flame doing its work. Mercy would have let him grow into something twisted. Now, perhaps, he has a chance.”

Danarius looked toward the shadows dancing on the wall. “And yet, I sometimes wonder if we reach too quickly for the lash. If the Faithful Flame risks becoming the Cruel Flame in men’s hands.”

Bromrik's voice dropped, like a blade sheathed but not forgotten. “The Flame *is* cruel. To the unworthy. It is also kind—to those who kneel. We are not judges of comfort, Danarius. We are judges of truth. Mercy without truth is just cowardice dressed in white robes.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the only sound the soft creak of the fire.

Danarius broke it gently. “Tell me of Embershroud. What’s said of the old monks who shaped its stones? They say the original brethren built the first altar with their bare hands, and sealed it in blood.”

Bromrik’s eyes lit with memory. “Aye, and it’s true. I’ve seen the stone. Under the High Altar, there’s a slab, blackened from decades of soot and old ash. It’s not carved by tool but by burning palm. Each monk, when they laid it, pressed his hand upon it while chanting the Words of Foundation. Those who screamed failed the rite. Only those who finished the passage in full were allowed to stay.”

Danarius looked moved, almost reverent. “And they wonder why the place still speaks.”

“There is power there,” Bromrik said. “You feel it in the bones. When I first walked the library at midnight, I heard no voice, saw no light. But I *knew* I was being watched. Not by men, but by the Flame itself. It lingers in the dust.”

Danarius smiled faintly. “They say the High Purifier sleeps with a dagger beneath his pillow and a candle that never goes out.”

“He does,” Bromrik confirmed. “The candle is a relic. It’s said to be lit from the original Flame of Ordination, the first fire kindled by Saint Ardmal when he received the vision of the Holy Path. It has never gone out. If it ever does, it is said the Flame has withdrawn from us.”

Danarius crossed himself again and bowed his head. “Saint Ardmal preserve us.”

Bromrik, with slower, deeper breath, closed his eyes. “As long as we remember the law and carry the punishment, the candle will burn. It’s when we grow soft, forgetful, merciful beyond measure… that’s when the wick dies.”

Danarius nodded, and they both sat quietly, letting the weight of that thought settle between them.

The wine had mellowed the sharpness of their tongues, but not the clarity of their minds. The fire crackled lower now, reduced to glowing coals, but neither Bromrik nor Danarius made move to leave. Their talk had turned from scripture to the living practice of judgment, and the air between them felt heavy with memory.

Danarius shifted in his chair, rubbing one hand along the edge of his robe.

“You know what frightens me more than open heresy?” he asked quietly. “The kind that smiles. The kind that kneels and says the words perfectly, but hides rot beneath the skin.”

Bromrik nodded slowly, eyes hardening. “The worst ones always come dressed in obedience. I’ve seen it more times than I can count. They bow, they quote scripture, they give coin—but their eyes don’t burn. You know what I mean? There’s no *fire* in them. Just calculation.”

Danarius tapped his goblet lightly. “We had a merchant here once, well-liked by the villagers. Generous. Pious. Every month he brought bread for the poor. Every quarter, a donation to the monastery. When we finally caught him, he was sacrificing crows in the woods at night. Called it ‘ancestral cleansing.’ Had the audacity to say it helped him pray clearer.”

“What did you do with him?” Bromrik asked.

Danarius sighed. “We hanged him in the square. Quietly. Told the people he’d been caught thieving. It was easier than explaining the rest. No one mourned long. Funny how fast they forget good men once you show them the truth beneath.”

Bromrik frowned. “I’d have made it public. Made them *watch.* Heresy dies louder when it’s wrapped in shame.”

Danarius tilted his head. “Sometimes I think fear is a weak flame. It burns fast, but dies just as quickly.”

“Which is why we pair it with *memory,*” Bromrik said. “You burn one, but make the rest write down why. Spread it. Preach it. Engrave it on the damn chapel walls if you must.”

Danarius chuckled grimly. “You’d have made a fine teacher in another life, Bromrik.”

“I *am* a teacher,” Bromrik answered. “My classroom is the scaffold, and my pupils are the ones who think they know better than the Flame.”

There was a pause. The candles flickered. Outside, a breeze rustled the leaves against the monastery wall like whispers.

Danarius leaned forward slightly. “Tell me one of your worst. One heretic who lingers in your mind still.”

Bromrik didn’t answer immediately. He stared into the wine, then spoke in a low voice.

“There was a man in Thornhollow, four winters back. Called himself Brother Selin. Preacher. Had a silver tongue, that one. Claimed visions from the Flame. Wore robes, carried a forged tome—looked like ours, down to the binding thread. But his teachings… twisted. Said the Flame had evolved. That suffering was outdated. That all men were already cleansed, and sin was just a misunderstanding.”

Danarius’s expression soured. “A mockery.”

“A poison,” Bromrik said. “He had a following. Not just peasants—merchants, scribes, even two novices from the outer cloister. I questioned him for six days. He never broke. Smiled the whole time. Said the real heretic was me.”

Danarius asked quietly, “Did you kill him?”

“No,” Bromrik said, eyes hard. “I burned him alive in the village square. And when the fire reached his throat, *then* he screamed. Not for mercy. But in rage. Said I’d silenced a prophet.”

“And the others?” Danarius asked.

“They watched. And after… not one of them ever spoke of him again. I sent them for re-education.”

Silence held between them for a moment. Then Danarius muttered, “So it is written: ‘The tongue may bless the Flame, but the heart may hold embers cold as ash.’”

Bromrik nodded. “Fifth Book. Chapter Three. Verse Nine. We’re only ever a word away from damnation.”

Danarius filled their cups once more. “Let us never forget that, brother.”

They drank again, slower now, heavy with memory and the grim understanding that inquisition was never just duty—it was burden. One carried bone-deep.

The room had settled into a heavy stillness, save for the occasional snap of embers in the hearth and the soft clink of ceramic as wine was poured once more. Bromrik and Danarius leaned into the weariness of long memory and longer conviction, their eyes dulled not by wine but by the unshakable weight of their shared path.

Danarius, slower now, turned his gaze toward the carved wooden arch above the door. A depiction of the Sacred Flame’s earliest disciples was etched there—seven robed figures standing before a pillar of fire, their eyes blindfolded in trust.

“Do you ever wonder,” he said softly, “if the Flame still burns as hot as it once did? Not in the heavens—there I never doubt. But here. Among us. In this world.”

Bromrik turned toward the arch, then back to Danarius. “The fire hasn’t faded. The wood’s just gotten wetter. Too many hearts these days are damp with doubt, swollen with comfort. They don’t burn as they should because they’ve never been tested.”

Danarius gave a small sigh. “Still, I remember stories from the old monks of Embershroud. They say in the early days, before ink met parchment, the Flame would speak directly. That when the Grand Inquisitor Ardros prayed, his skin glowed, and his words made heretics weep without blade or fire.”

“I’ve read the same,” Bromrik said. “And I’ve seen miracles too. Once in the southern marshes, I touched a man infected with blood-rot. He denied the Flame with his last breath, and the rot spread over his face in seconds—before he’d even stopped breathing. As if the sin had been holding it back. That wasn’t disease. That was judgment.”

Danarius tapped his fingers slowly against his goblet. “It makes you wonder why the Flame needs us. If it can act like that, what use are we?”

Bromrik didn't hesitate. "Because the Flame is eternal, but the people aren't. They forget. And forgetting is the root of heresy. We are not here to add to the Flame—we are here to *remind* the world that it burns. Every judgment we make is not a sentence. It's a sermon."

Danarius smiled faintly, though it didn't reach his eyes. "A sermon written in blood."

"As it must be," Bromrik replied. "Some truths are too deep for parchment. They must be carved into flesh, so the pain teaches what the words cannot."

Danarius looked down at the table. "When I was young, I thought I'd spend my life tending the sick and copying books. I never imagined I'd one day sign the orders for three men to be executed for idol speech. I still remember their names. I wonder sometimes if that's weakness, or proof of faith."

"It's neither," Bromrik said. "It's the mark of the burden. We do not judge because we enjoy it. We judge because someone must. The Flame gives us strength—but it never promised peace."

Danarius looked up again. "And yet there's something beautiful in it, isn't there? Something unshakable. We don't serve a god of lies, or shadows, or whims. We serve fire. Pure, simple, honest. It burns all the same, whether it touches wood, gold, or flesh."

Bromrik nodded slowly, tapping the edge of his tome. "That's why I joined the Order. Other gods forgive, bribe, forget. The Lord-Father doesn't change His rules. He doesn't plead. He *commands.* And that... is holy."

A silence stretched again between them, but this time it was reverent. They sat together as two who had walked through flame and carried it forward, black-robed figures bearing the unbearable and calling it sacred.

The candles had burned nearly to their roots, leaving the chamber in a dim hush of flickering orange and long shadows. The fire in the hearth was now only a low glow, casting dull light over the worn table and the two tired men still seated before it. Their robes had loosened, their posture slackened, but their eyes remained focused—drawn not to each other now, but to the quiet stillness in the air. A silence that seemed to invite the final, inevitable question neither had asked.

Danarius broke it with a whisper.

"What do you think comes after?"

Bromrik looked at him, slow and steady, the way a stone watches a river. "After the last name is judged?"

Danarius nodded. "After the final sin is burned, the last heretic condemned, the last candle extinguished in our chambers."

Bromrik leaned back, pipe unlit in his hand, and exhaled through his nose like a draft from a cooling forge. “I’ve thought on it more than I’ll admit. Some believe we’ll stand before the Flame ourselves, stripped bare, and it will weigh us. Measure the weight of our wrath, our mercy, our pride.”

Danarius folded his arms across his chest. “And do you believe you’ll be found worthy?”

Bromrik didn’t speak at once. He scratched his beard, eyes narrowing. “I don’t *expect* worthiness. That’s for kings and saints. I expect… acknowledgment. That I served. That I carried the weight when others wouldn’t.”

Danarius nodded slowly. “A faithful servant. Not perfect, but constant.”

Bromrik grunted. “The flame doesn’t ask for flawlessness. It asks for fuel. If I burned hot enough in life, maybe that’s enough.”

Danarius smiled faintly. “My old mentor used to say, ‘Better to enter the afterworld ash and spent than cold and untouched.’ I used to think that was too harsh. Now I see the wisdom.”

Bromrik looked toward the embers. “I’d rather my soul go up in smoke doing the Lord-Father’s will than rot in silence waiting for peace. Let my bones crack, let my blood boil. If the Flame doesn’t take me, I’ll take it to the gates of the beyond and hammer on them myself.”

Danarius laughed softly, a sound of fatigue and kinship. “They’ll hear you, no doubt. Flame knows we’ve made enough noise down here.”

The two men sat in quiet for a while longer, sipping slowly, the heat of the room waning. Outside, the wind in the trees grew gentler, as if listening to the final exchanges of two worn vessels of faith.

Danarius finally said, “If I die in this monastery, let it be in prayer. Quiet, with a candle lit. But if I had your fire, I’d die on the road. On the scaffold. Axe in hand.”

Bromrik turned to him and raised his cup one final time. “Then pray for me when I fall. And I’ll carry your name when I burn.”

Danarius clinked his goblet softly to Bromrik’s. “Then may the Flame find us both. Not for what we hoped to be, but for what we dared to do.”

The night stretched on, and neither man left the table. They had spoken all that needed speaking—for now. Outside, the stars wheeled silently over the forest, and within the monastery walls, two servants of the Sacred Flame sat in the warm remains of faith, fire, and fate.

Bromrik finished the last of his wine in a single long draught, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand as he leaned back and let out a thunderous belch that echoed through the candle-

lit chamber. Danarius chuckled wearily and stood, signaling to a passing nun near the doorway.

“Sister, see our brother Bromrik to his chamber. He’s earned his rest.”

Bromrik stood as well, his legs slightly stiff from long sitting. He offered a nod of thanks, tucked his worn tome beneath his arm, and followed the quiet, robed sister down the corridor lit with flickering lanterns. When they reached the small stone room prepared for him, he paused in the doorway and glanced at her.

“Stay a while,” he said, his voice quieter than usual. “It has been a night of heavy talk. Let us offer prayer together before rest.”

The nun lowered her eyes and gave a small bow. “As you wish, Inquisitor.”

They knelt by the foot of the cot, facing the small iron cross on the wall. Bromrik opened the tome and recited in a steady voice:

“O Flame that forges souls, burn away the darkness in us. Let no desire rise above devotion, no hunger rise above duty. Make our hearts weapons of Your truth. Let our flesh not betray the spirit, but be bound in reverent silence.”

The nun echoed: “Burn us clean, O Lord-Father. Where we are weak, make us ash and rebuild us. Where we are strong, temper us still.”

They prayed for half an hour, wordless at times, lost in quiet flame-born reverence.

When the last prayer was whispered, Bromrik turned to the nun, eyes tired but warm. “Even the flesh carries burden,” he said. “And the Flame asks it to be burned clean, does it not?”

He reached for her hand, and she hesitated only briefly, then nodded. “If the Inquisitor speaks so, then this must be true,” she murmured, her voice soft as wool.

What followed was not lust, but a solemn surrender to human frailty—shared between two servants of the same faith, cloaked in conviction and the silence of night. Afterward, the nun dressed and left without a word. Bromrik remained kneeling before the iron cross, whispering his penitence.

“Lord-Father, I have faltered. Let this moment of weakness be burned away. Let this act, though clothed in prayer, be forgiven. I am still Yours.”

Morning came with birdsong and the scent of fresh bread. Bromrik, already dressed and washed, made his way to Danarius’s chambers, where the priest welcomed him with open arms.

“Sleep well, brother?” Danarius asked, pouring them both a cup of deep red wine.

“Well enough,” Bromrik grunted, accepting the cup.

Their breakfast was laid simply but richly—loaves of crusty dark bread still steaming, blood sausage seasoned with sage and clove, and a wedge of hard cheese. They ate heartily, both too accustomed to long travel and lean rations to take such a meal lightly.

Afterward, Danarius stepped to a large oak chest and opened it with a heavy iron key. Inside lay a treasure's weight of gold and silver—tithes, penalties, tributes from the surrounding farms and villages.

"You travel hard roads, brother," Danarius said, holding up a small pouch. "Take this. For the needs of the road, for the Flame's work."

Bromrik raised a hand. "No need. I carry enough."

Danarius smiled and filled the pouch anyway, handing it over with quiet insistence. "The Lord-Father provides. Through us, when necessary."

Bromrik accepted it with a nod. "Then may it be used to bring fire where it must fall."

The two men knelt once more on the cold stone, side by side, and whispered a final prayer. The nun brought his clean clothes and he dressed.

"May the road burn straight before your feet, brother," Danarius said as they stood.

"And may your chapel stay clean of shadow," Bromrik replied.

With that, Bromrik returned to his wagon. Krosh, as ever, stood waiting, tail swishing in half-hearted protest. Bromrik climbed aboard, checked the straps, and clicked his tongue. The wagon rolled forward into the green hush of the forest road, the monastery fading behind him.

The Flame never rested. Nor did he.

Bromrik had been on the road an hour when the sun reached its highest point, dappling the forest path in gold. The summer heat clung to him under his robes, and even the wind had gone quiet. He pulled the reins gently and brought Krosh to a halt beneath a thicket of old, towering trees. The earth here was soft, shaded, and welcoming. With a grunt, he stepped off the wagon and stretched, his joints cracking like old timber.

As he rubbed the stiffness from his back, his eyes caught the dark yawn of a cave entrance just beyond a cluster of ferns. It was framed by jagged stone and half-choked with creeping vines, but unmistakable. Bromrik narrowed his eyes and stepped toward it.

"Could be nothing," he muttered to himself, "but caves have always drawn the faithful."

He remembered the tales—monks who withdrew to live in darkness for weeks, months even, emerging thinner, quieter, but lit from within. They spoke of visions, of whispered truth in the silence of stone. There was something sacred about earth that had never seen the light of day.

Cheered by the thought, Bromrik passed through the cave mouth, leaving the sun behind.

Inside, the light filtered through a crack high in the ceiling, casting a long shaft that illuminated the center of the cavern. Moss clung to the walls, and the smell of cool stone and lichen filled his nose. He moved carefully, his boots brushing soft sand and the occasional bone-dry leaf. At the heart of the chamber, where the light touched the ground like a blessing, Bromrik sat. He closed his eyes and bowed his head.

No words. Just stillness.

He sat for a long time, murmuring quiet prayers in his mind. Thanking the Lord-Father for the strength of his limbs, the sharpness of his mind, and for the mercy of another day of righteous purpose. His breathing slowed. The weight of the world seemed to recede, and in that silence he felt something deep, ancestral—a faint pulse in the stone itself, like the breath of the divine.

But peace never lasted long for men like Bromrik.

From deeper within the cave, a sound broke the stillness: footsteps, soft but deliberate, padding over dry sand and stone. Bromrik opened one eye, then both, and slowly reached for the axe at his belt. The footsteps grew louder. He stood, muscles tensing, eyes narrowing into the dark.

Then the thing emerged.

It looked, at first glance, like an orc—but misshapen, as if twisted by wrong birth or wicked curse. Its skin was blotched green and gray, its limbs too long, the bones under its flesh pushing out like misshapen branches. Its eyes were pitch black, mouth wide with jagged teeth that curved inward. A scent came with it—flesh left too long in water.

“What in the name of the Flame…” Bromrik whispered. “From what cursed pit did *you* crawl?”

The creature didn’t answer. It screeched—a high, shrill sound that shook dust from the stone above—and lunged.

Bromrik ducked and rolled to the side, drawing his axe in a single motion. The creature moved fast, swinging a clawed arm that tore gouges into the wall where Bromrik had stood seconds earlier. Bromrik brought the axe around and struck, slicing deep into its side, but the creature only screamed louder and lashed out, catching him in the chest and flinging him backward.

He hit the wall hard, the breath driven from his lungs. His vision blurred. Before he could rise fully, the beast was on him, claws tearing at his robe, one slash grazing across his jaw. Blood filled his mouth. He snarled, spit crimson, and with a bellow, drove his boot into the creature’s knee, throwing it off balance.

He rose with a growl, ducked beneath a wild swing, and brought his axe up under its arm, burying the blade deep. The creature shrieked in pain, stumbling back, but did not fall. It

lunged again, clawing his shoulder. Bromrik roared and countered with a blow across the skull. The creature dropped to its knees.

Bromrik raised the axe high. “You’ve had your shriek, beast. Now hear the last word of the Lord-Father.”

He brought the axe down.

The creature’s head twisted violently, and it collapsed to the ground, shuddering once, then still. Its blood was black and thick, seeping into the cave floor.

Panting, bleeding, Bromrik leaned on his axe and spat.

“Sanctified ground, my arse,” he muttered. “No peace, not even in a holy cave.”

But he stood tall, wiped his mouth, and said a final prayer over the corpse, took some holy water from his belt and dripped it onto the beasts body.

“May your wickedness be burned in the fire you never knew.”

And with that, he limped back toward the sunlight, leaving behind the echo of battle and the silence of stone.

The forest slowly fell away behind him as the sun began to dip low in the sky, painting the treetops with gold and rust. Bromrik, sore and bruised from the battle in the cave, sat slumped on the cart, pipe clenched between his teeth, his cloak stiff with dried blood and sweat. He cracked the whip against Krosh’s flank without ceremony.

“Move, you shadow-born lump. There’s still justice to be done before night.”

Brimstick village

Krosh groaned and plodded forward, pulling the cart steadily through the thinning woods until, after hours of travel, the village of Brimstick came into view. A quiet place of dirt roads, leaning timber houses, and a windmill that creaked slowly in the western breeze. Chickens scattered as Bromrik rode in, and a few children stopped to stare at the figure wrapped in black robes, dust, and firelight.

He halted at the edge of the village square and drew the scroll from his cloak. Unrolling it with thick fingers, he muttered curses under his breath as he traced the names written there.

“Nugir, mill worker,” he grumbled. “One of the bold ones.”

He climbed down from the wagon with a grunt, stretched his back, and made his way through the side road to the farmhouse just past the mill. He rapped his knuckles once on the door before pushing it open, not waiting for welcome.

Nugir, a broad-shouldered man with a soot-stained shirt and rough hands, opened the door just in time to see Bromrik barge in past him.

“I am Bromrik Stonemantle,” the dwarf said firmly, making straight for the table. “Inquisitor of the Sacred Flame. This is now an investigation of heresy and criminal offense under the authority of the Church.”

He sat down, set the black-bound tome upon the table, and opened it.

“Nugir,” Bromrik said slowly, reading from the page, “you are accused of defying church orders, insulting a monk of the Order, physically assaulting him, stealing from the community tithe, and suspected involvement in the disappearance of Village Elder Marid. What say you in your defense?”

Nugir stood rigid, lips thin. “Nothing. I… the monk insulted me first. He came into my workshop and called me a drunk and a fraud. As for Marid—I don’t know where she is. She disappeared. And the church has no right to come into my house with threats. I’ve paid my taxes, done my prayers. That should be enough.”

Bromrik’s expression tightened. “The word of a monk is the word of God Himself, passed through fire and sanctity. To insult a brother of the order is not merely rude—it is blasphemy. And you, Nugir, were seen as the last to speak with Marid—at night, on the edge of the woods. You *know* where she went.”

“I said I don’t!” Nugir snapped. “To hell with you and your orders!”

Bromrik’s chair scraped back sharply as he stood. His eyes, once tired, now burned with fury.

“You dare curse the Flame in your own home?” he snarled. “You invite judgment—then let it fall!”

He lunged at Nugir, striking him across the face with the back of his hand. Nugir staggered, but Bromrik followed with another blow, then another—his fists like hammers.

Nugir’s wife burst into the room, shrieking. “Stop! You’re killing him!”

Bromrik turned on her. “Interference in inquisitorial justice is a crime! You’ll answer for that too!”

She screamed as his fist caught her across the temple. She dropped to the ground, stunned, blood from her lip already staining the floor.

Bromrik returned to Nugir, who lay gasping. He grabbed him by the collar and pulled him up.

“Confess, or burn.”

Nugir trembled, blood seeping from his mouth. “I… I killed her. Eight winters she owed me coin. I asked again and again. She laughed—said it was gone. I followed her to the woods and…”

He trailed off.

Bromrik pulled his axe free and placed it on the table with a loud thud.

“For theft, for defiling the sacred order, for raising your hand to a monk of the Church, and for the murder of Elder Marid, I pronounce your sentence: death by hanging.”

He looked toward the woman still slumped on the floor.

“You defended him. You knew. You said nothing. That makes you his accomplice. Your sentence is the same.”

Both of them now weeping, Bromrik dragged them from the house, down the road toward the mill. Villagers began to emerge from homes, watching silently, fearfully. Bromrik said nothing as he took a length of rope from the mill wall, tied two nooses, and threw them over the beam that supported the old storage loft.

He placed two stools beneath the ropes and turned to the condemned.

“Climb,” he said coldly.

They did, trembling.

“May the Flame have mercy,” he muttered, and with two swift kicks, knocked the blocks from beneath them.

The crowd gasped. Some turned away. The bodies swung gently in the wind, shadows dancing against the barn.

Bromrik stood alone in the square, staring up at them, his axe slung once more across his back.

“One less shadow,” he said to no one in particular. “And the path burns clearer.”

Then he turned, walked back to his cart, and prepared to ride on, the dust of Brimstick curling behind him like smoke.

The rain had softened to a mist as Bromrik guided Krosh down the winding path through the rocky valley. Clouds loomed overhead, casting a gray pall over the landscape. The dwarf took a swig from his wineskin, the sharp taste cutting through the damp air. He hummed a low tune, the melody lost amidst the rustling leaves and distant thunder.

As the path curved around a bend, Bromrik spotted a solitary figure trudging along the roadside. The man was hunched, his robes tattered and soaked, his steps heavy with weariness. Bromrik pulled the reins, bringing the cart to a halt beside the stranger.

"Ho there, traveler!" Bromrik called out, climbing down from the cart. "You look like you've been through the Nine Hells. Need some water?"

The man looked up, his eyes hollow and rimmed with red. He nodded slowly. "Aye, water would be... appreciated."

Bromrik handed him a flask. "Name's Bromrik Stonemantle, Inquisitor of the Sacred Flame. And you are?"

The man took a long drink before replying. "Ornik. Once a monk of the order. But those days are behind me."

Bromrik raised an eyebrow. "A monk, you say? Then you know the teachings of the Lord-Father. 'The flame guides those who seek its light.' You've merely lost your way, brother."

Ornik shook his head. "The flame has dimmed. I see no light, only shadows."

Bromrik's expression hardened. "Blasphemy. The flame never dims; it's we who close our eyes to it. Remember the words: 'In darkness, the faithful shall kindle the spark.' Return to the monastery, seek penance, and the light will find you again."

“Penance?” Ornik scoffed, bitter and hollow. “I’ve walked that path. It’s led me nowhere.”

Bromrik stepped forward, the scowl on his face tightening into something more primal. His gloved fist struck fast and hard—once across the face, then again into the gut. Ornik staggered backward, gasping.

“Then perhaps you need a reminder of your vows, maggot,” Bromrik growled. “You don’t betray the Order and walk away thinking the Flame forgets.”

Ornik crumpled to his knees in the muddy road, coughing, the drizzle mixing with the blood on his lip. Bromrik stood over him, his voice turning solemn and heavy with scripture.

“‘Let those who stray be guided by the rod, for discipline is the path to salvation.’”

Ornik looked up, blinking through rain and shame. A flicker passed through his eyes—not fear, not pain, but memory.

“I… I remember those words.”

Bromrik’s voice softened, just a shade. “Then say them.”

Ornik lowered his head, and in a voice cracked and unsure, he began to murmur:

“‘Blessed be the Flame, for it burns what is false. In the light, I shall find truth. In obedience, I shall be made whole.’”

Bromrik nodded slowly, watching him. “Good. Now listen. There’s a monastery at Springsparrow Shire. Go there. Knock on their door before the next dawn, confess every step of your fall, and serve without question. If you stray again, the next Inquisitor won’t offer you a hand.”

Ornik, still kneeling, placed his hand on his chest. “I… I will. I’ll return.”

Without another word, Bromrik turned and climbed back onto his wagon. Krosh snorted as the whip snapped and the cart rolled forward through the gray valley, leaving behind only cart tracks, rainwater, and a man who had once been lost—and perhaps, barely, found again.

The rain was steady as Bromrik drove down the muddy slope into a small clearing, where the warm glow of lanterns marked the Muddy Waggon tavern—a sturdy timber building with smoke rising from its chimney and laughter leaking from its windows. Despite the name, it was one of the better roadside stops Bromrik had known, and as he tied Krosh outside under the awning, the smell of roasting meat and wine drifted through the door and welcomed him like an old friend.

Inside, the tavern was crowded but not unruly. Merchants, farmers, two woodsmen, and a table of halflings crowded around drinks and stew. Bromrik stepped in, brushed the rain from his cloak, and made his way to the innkeeper with a grunt.

“A room. And your best meal,” he said.

Soon he was seated by the hearth with a plate of roasted deer meat drizzled in thick brown sauce, fresh greens, and a dessert dish of honeycombs and berries. A clay goblet of dark wine stood at his elbow. He was halfway through the venison when a small figure appeared beside his table—a young halfling, not more than ten, with bright eyes and quick curiosity.

“Hello, sir,” the halfling said. “What do you do for a living? Are you a priest?”

Bromrik glanced at him, chewing slowly, then wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve.

“I once was a monk,” he said. “But now I’m an Inquisitor.”

The halfling blinked. “What does an Inquisitor do?”

Bromrik sipped his wine before answering. “I see that the will of the Holy Order is filled in our lands. The Sacred Flame’s justice must be served to the unholy and to those who’ve gone astray from the Lord-Father’s way. I find them, I judge them, and I carry out what must be done.”

The halfling’s eyes grew wide. “Can you tell me more of the Sacred Flame?”

Noticing now the boy’s youth and eagerness, Bromrik leaned forward, his voice gentler. “Aye, lad. You must also become a follower of the Sacred Flame, for the Lord-Father watches over us all, great and small.”

He placed a hand on the table, closed his eyes, and recited:

“Sacred Flame, light in the dark, Forgive our errors, ignite our spark. Burn in our hearts, purge every stain, Guide us through sorrow, sin, and pain.”

As he finished, another halfling approached—older, with streaks of silver in her hair and a worried smile on her lips. She gave a small bow.

“My apologies, Inquisitor, my boy Bun means no disrespect.”

Bromrik leaned back and looked at her over the rim of his goblet. “That’s quite all right. Just see that your child learns the prayer at the right age… which I presume *you* know well?”

Without flinching, the halfling woman folded her hands and said calmly,

“O Lord-Father who watches above, Fire of judgment, fire of love. Let no falsehood in me dwell, Make my heart a burning well.”

Bromrik, satisfied, lifted his goblet and downed the rest of his wine in one long gulp. He thudded the cup down and let out a deep, echoing belch. “May the Father watch over us all,” he declared.

The halflings bowed and took their leave. Bromrik ordered a second helping of wine and a room key from the tavern maid. He climbed the stairs panting and entered a handsome chamber lined with thick carpets and a carved bedframe. Soon after, a human maid arrived—young, with quiet manners and steady hands.

“Wash my feet and rub them down. I’ve walked miles in judgment,” Bromrik said, puffing his pipe and sinking into the padded chair. She obeyed, washing his calloused feet and massaging them with lavender and rose oil from a small vial she carried.

“Splendid, my lady,” Bromrik murmured, handing her a silver coin as she finished. “A blessing for those who serve the faithful.”

When she left, he cracked open his worn tome, reading by lantern light. The same passage he’d read to Bun echoed again, deeper in meaning. He closed the book, knelt by the bedside, and prayed aloud.

“Flame that sees all, I walk your path. Let me not falter in judgment or truth.”

The rain tapped soft against the windowpanes. He crawled into the bed, the smell of lavender and smoke lingering on his cloak, and fell into a deep sleep beneath the watchful eye of the Sacred Flame.

The morning light crept in through the tavern shutters, casting golden streaks over the stone floor. Bromrik stirred under thick woolen sheets, yawning and scratching his beard. With a grunt, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, stretched until his joints cracked, and muttered a short prayer.

“Another day to serve. Another day to burn shadow,” he said, pulling on his boots.

He made his way downstairs, where the hearth fire had been stoked again, and the smell of barley and warm bread filled the air. Taking his usual place at a side table, Bromrik barked toward the kitchen, “A bowl of hot porridge, fresh crust, and a cup of dark ale.”

The innkeeper nodded and brought it without question. Bromrik tore into the bread first, scooping it through the porridge and letting the warm grains fill his belly. He sipped his ale slowly, savoring the silence before the road called again. Once finished, he left a few silver on the table and stepped outside, the morning fresh with dew and promise.

Krosh waited, chewing a tuft of grass by the cart. Bromrik climbed up, adjusted the leather reins, and drove off toward the east, where meadows rolled like green waves beneath a sky spotted with distant clouds.

Hours passed beneath birdsong and shifting winds. The trail thinned into a grassy line flanked by wildflowers and buzzing flies. Just as Bromrik slowed to rest the mule, he saw a figure blocking the path ahead.

An old man stood at the center of the meadow path. His beard was long and white, his scalp half-bald and crusted with old scabs. His robes were adorned with what looked like tiny

humanoid skulls—gnome, halfling, maybe even a child's—and his eyes were deep set, mad with some dark knowledge. In his left hand, he gripped a chipped axe that still shone red in the sunlight.

"Off your cart, traveler," the man growled. "And leave all your coin, weapons, and scripture behind."

Bromrik narrowed his eyes. "You mad, old bastard?"

"I am Brathom. Last tongue of the Ashen Cradle. And this road belongs to those who walk in the old blood."

Bromrik snorted and stood on the cart. "You wear the bones of the innocent and brandish theft and murder like a right. You speak of old blood, but you've no flame in your soul—only rot."

He opened his tome and raised one hand high.

"'The road is not for the faithless, and he who bars it shall be judged by fire and iron.' You are a heretic, and your time ends here."

Brathom let out a gurgling laugh. "Then come, Inquisitor. Let's see if your gods bleed."

Bromrik leapt from the cart and drew his axe. The two clashed in the high grass, steel striking steel, sparks flying. Brathom swung low and fast, clipping Bromrik's thigh. The dwarf grunted and countered, swinging a heavy arc that caught Brathom across the ribs, but the old

man didn’t slow. He rammed his shoulder into Bromrik’s gut, sending him tumbling into the grass.

Bromrik rolled and came up with a backhand slash that nicked Brathom’s forearm. The madman howled and swung wildly, his axe biting into Bromrik’s shoulder. Pain flashed, but Bromrik held firm, slamming his forehead into Brathom’s nose with a sickening crack.

They broke apart, both bloodied, breathing hard. Bromrik’s robe was torn at the collar, red seeping down his side. Brathom panted like a dog, grinning, his teeth yellow and streaked.

“I’ve killed ten of your kind,” Brathom spat. “You’re just a tombstone waiting for a name.”

Bromrik answered with a roar, charged, and knocked Brathom backward. His axe came down, hacking into the man’s thigh. Brathom screamed and stumbled, but still fought. They grappled, rolled, their axes clanging and scraping. At last, Bromrik twisted free and drove the butt of his axe into Brathom’s temple.

The man dropped to his knees, dazed.

Bromrik stood above him, face smeared with blood, hand steady.

“This road belongs to the righteous,” he said, and brought the blade down in a clean arc, severing Brathom’s head.

The body slumped, blood soaking into the earth.

Bromrik bent down, lifted the head by its white hair, and inspected the lifeless face. “May the Flame show you the mercy I didn’t.”

He tossed the head to the grass and sat down, panting.

Krosh had wandered a few feet away, unbothered by the carnage.

Bromrik wiped his axe clean, reapplied bandages from a pouch at his belt, and offered a final prayer over the dead.

“Let shadow be ended. Let the path remain holy.”

Then he climbed back onto the wagon, rolled his neck, and drove on.

Dusk bled into night as Bromrik’s cart rumbled along a ridge overlooking a dark valley. The sky, streaked with orange and purple, flickered with firelight from below. Bromrik narrowed his eyes. Smoke curled into the air in thick black ribbons, rising from rooftops ablaze. He halted Krosh with a tug of the reins, standing in the cart to see better. It was a village—and it was burning.

Without a word, he climbed down, axe slung across his back, and followed the dirt path that twisted down the hill. As he approached the edge of the valley, he saw two figures silhouetted against the fire’s glow, standing on a grassy rise above the chaos. A man and a woman—covered in ash, their clothes scorched and faces grim.

Bromrik approached them slowly. “Good evening to you folks. What’s this business? What’s happened here?”

The woman turned, her eyes wide and red-rimmed. “The inquisition soldiers came this morning… said the entire village had fallen into heresy. They spoke of blasphemy, of black rites beneath the chapel, of children named after false gods. They said the Flame must be fed.” Her voice broke. “They… they killed nearly everyone. Then set the homes alight.”

The man beside her spoke, quieter. “We were on the outer farms. They let us watch. Everything we owned… is gone.”

Bromrik watched the flames rise and crackle, the silhouette of the chapel roof collapsing in sparks.

“So be it,” he said solemnly. “The work of our good Lord Father must be carried out. This land has grown foul. If sin was rooted here, fire was the cure. Blessed be our Lord Father, whose hand does not tremble.”

The woman fell to her knees and wept.

Bromrik reached into his robes and pulled free his tome, opening to a familiar page. His voice, low and firm, cut through the crackling fire.

“‘He who clutches to false gods shall be turned to ash, and his home with him. Let the righteous grieve, but never question the fire, for the fire does not lie.’” He looked at the man. “‘To wander in the dark is not failure—but to build a home there is.’”

He shut the tome.

“If the Lord wills it, you’ll find new shelter. The faithful are never abandoned for long.”

He offered no comfort beyond those words. Turning back to his cart, he left the grieving pair atop the hill as the embers glowed behind them.

The road to Hellens lay ahead.

It took a full week’s travel through open plains and rising hills, deep valleys carved by time, and thick groves of pine that sighed in the wind. Bromrik camped under trees or beside the road, always with a fire burning close and Krosh tied nearby. At night, he laid out dried venison and stale bread, washing it down with water and wine. Beneath the stars, pipe in hand, he stared into the sky and prayed quietly.

“Sacred Flame, let me not falter. Let my arm be firm, my judgment clean. Burn away the weakness of pity, and sharpen the edge of my will.”

He’d sleep atop the cart wrapped in his cloak, the tome always under his arm like a shield.

On the sixth night, he unrolled the scroll again, eyes flicking over the names written in tight ink. Six of them waited in Hellens—scribes, merchants, a smith, a tavern singer, a retired soldier, and a noble’s cousin. Each accused. Each to be judged.

He whispered their names into the fire one by one, like a chant.

Then he closed his eyes and drifted off, the stars wheeling slowly above, and the wind rustling the prayer pages in his lap.

Hellens city

The city of Hellens loomed like a fortress against the morning haze, its black stone walls towering above fields and winding roads. Smoke rose from the harbor quarter, not of fire, but of ships and forges, mingling with the cries of dockworkers and market barkers. Its gates were ironbound and watched by halberdiers in polished steel. Beyond them, Hellens spread in layers—the low slums choking in mud and smoke, the merchant quarter bustling with guild wagons and coin-singers, the noble spires catching the sun with cruel beauty, and the holy spires of the Cathedral Hill stabbing into the sky like fingers made of prayer and stone.

Bromrik steered his cart into the commoners’ quarter, past lines of wash strung across the alleys and the sour stench of old thatch. He found the house listed in his scroll—a modest stone dwelling with soot-blackened shutters and no ornament at the door.

He knocked. A moment passed, then the door creaked open.

A woman stood there—middle-aged, with parchment-stained fingers and weariness behind her eyes. “Yes?” she asked.

“Inquisitor Bromrik,” he said, stepping past her before she could move. She froze as he entered and set his tome on the table. “Dorotha. You are accused of writing heretical texts. Texts written and spread against the Holy Order of the Sacred Flame. This is blasphemy of the highest order.”

Tears welled in Dorotha’s eyes. “I… I did not know they were considered heretical,” she stammered. “I only expressed my views… of free choice to God.”

Bromrik slammed his gauntlet on the table. “God is not of free choice! If everybody chose, then we’d have only heretics left. What would become of this world then, Dorotha?”

She looked down, ashamed. “They… they took everything. I have nothing left. No texts remain.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Bromrik began tearing through the house. Shelves were emptied, beds overturned, scrolls unrolled and inspected. For half an hour he scoured the home. Finally, in a dusty cellar closet behind a broken ladder, he found it—a hidden cache of parchment. When he opened the bundle and read the inked lines, his face darkened. Words questioning the divine hierarchy, mocking sacred law, asking if the Lord-Father was ever truly just.

He tore them to pieces, scattered them into the hearth, and fed them to the flames.

He stormed back upstairs, fury stiffening every movement. “So this is how you lie to the Inquisitor?” he shouted. “You said nothing was left. *Liar!*” He struck her across the cheek with the back of his hand.

Dorotha staggered, sobbing. “I—I forgot! I haven’t gone into the cellar in ages!”

Bromrik stood over her, gaze like molten iron. “For hiding evidence from the Inquisition, and for authoring works condemning the Sacred Flame, the sentence is death. You will be judged here, by axe and law.”

She fell to her knees. “Please… mercy…”

But Bromrik’s voice was steady. “‘Let the tongue that poisons the flock be silenced by steel, that its poison reach no farther.’ That is written. And so it must be done.”

He dragged her out into the small back yard, where smoke from the still-burning texts curled like ghosts into the gray air. He gave her a moment to kneel, face turned away, whispering what might have been a final prayer.

Then Bromrik raised his axe. The stroke was clean and her head rolled on the ground leaving a bloody trail.

He stood in silence for a long while afterward, staring at the bloodied grass, the ruined page of a life once filled with ink and thought. He walked back inside, sat heavily at her table, and wiped his hands on a rag. Then, lighting his pipe, he drew in a long breath of smoke and let it drift slowly toward the ceiling. His eyes closed as he leaned back.

“May the Father watch over her soul,” he muttered. “And may her ink not stain the path of another.”

The flames in the hearth whispered nothing in reply.

Bromrik left Dorotha’s house with his cloak damp from the morning mist and blood drying on his gloves. He climbed onto the cart, muttered a prayer for judgment completed, and directed Krosh into the merchants’ quarter of Hellens.

Here the streets were wider, lined with whitewashed buildings and well-fed guards lounging beneath carved stone archways. Rich tapestries fluttered from windows. The air smelled of spice, wine, and distant perfume.

He found the address on his scroll—an opulent residence with polished steps and gilded door hinges. Bromrik dismounted and rapped his knuckles on the door.

From inside came a muffled, irritated voice: “Get lost! I am not wanting to talk to you!”

Bromrik’s brow furrowed. He stepped back, then slammed the flat of his axe against the door, cracking it open. He stormed inside.

Within, a fat man sat reclined in a high-backed chair, sipping from a jeweled mug. The rug beneath his feet was imported, the fire roaring despite the spring warmth.

Bromrik crossed the room in heavy strides and struck the mug from the merchant’s hand, then slapped him hard across the face. The man cried out in surprise as his drink spilled across the floor.

“Inquisitor Bromrik of the Sacred Flame,” he growled. “You have been avoiding your tithe to the Order, failed to pay your debts to the church, and are accused of theft from monastic income by deceitful trade. What say you in your defense?”

The man—Ferding—raised his hands defensively, eyes wide. “Please, I just made trade. Honest trade! Some seasons were hard. I had to look after myself. I swear, I meant no offense to the Church.”

Bromrik pulled open his tome, flipping to a passage in heavy script. “For crimes against the treasury of the Sacred Flame and avoidance of tithe, property and all stored coin may be seized in full. You will tell me now, how much gold and silver is kept here.”

Ferding swallowed, then reached behind a cabinet and returned with a wooden coffer. “Four hundred gold… and a hundred silver,” he mumbled.

Bromrik snorted. “So this is what you've hidden while monasteries go hungry. Disgraceful.”

He went up to Ferding and told him. “ For your thieving crimes the punishment is the removal of you left hand.” He took the axe and chopped Ferdings left hand clean off, it falling to the ground with a hard thud. Ferding screamed in pain and held his hand, tears pouring from his eyes.

Bromrik confiscated the chest and set it aside, then turned to the wall and pulled down a quill and inkwell. On a parchment with the Order’s seal, he scrawled a decree of property seizure in the name of the city’s Holy Order.

“You will sign this,” he said. “Your house is now under Order possession.”

Ferding trembled but obeyed, scrawling his name with his right hand.

Bromrik watched him finish, then thrust a strip of cloth at the man. “You’re lucky I don’t send you to the gallows this day. Pray the Flame is not as unforgiving as I.”

He turned, uncorked a bottle from the table, poured himself a full mug of rich red wine, and drank it down in a single gulp. With that, he walked back to his cart, scroll heavier, conscience quiet.

“On to the next,” he muttered, and flicked the reins.

The morning bell rang out over Hellens, deep and resonant from the highest tower on Cathedral Hill. Bromrik had risen early, his cart creaking through the commoners’ quarter toward the forge district. His list grew shorter, but the names grew darker.

First came Orlin, the smith—a towering man whose beard was as black as soot and whose eyes burned with defiance. Bromrik had found him hammering a blade, the forge crackling around him.

“You are accused of striking Brother Tarl with a weapon of your trade,” Bromrik declared. “A monk of the Sacred Flame struck down like a blacksmith’s iron? Do you deny it?”

Orlin had glared. “He came to take my daughter. I did what I had to.”

Bromrik opened his tome, voice unwavering. “'He who raises a hand against the cloth raises it against the Father’s flame. Let his hands be bound and his soul judged by the rope.'”

Next, the tavern singer—Callia, a young woman with bright eyes and a defiant tongue—had been arrested at dawn.

“You sang songs mocking the Order,” Bromrik said to her as she was brought to the cart in irons. “Words matter, and yours were poison.”

She tried to laugh. “Only songs. People need songs.”

Bromrik’s face did not change. “'A tongue turned against the altar shall find no refuge in melody. Let it be silenced beneath the gallows wind.'”

Finally, the old soldier—Meron—was found slumped outside a shuttered bathhouse, too drunk to run. When Bromrik read the charges—murder, pagan rites, refusal of church summons—Meron only muttered curses.

“No more sermons,” the man growled. “I’ve killed for the Order before. You know nothing of sin.”

“You’ve walked with sin so long,” Bromrik replied, “you think it’s your shadow.”

He bound the three and set them on the back of his wagon. The ride up Cathedral Hill was long, cobbled, and steep. People followed behind like sheep to a grim sermon. The gallows stood at the plaza before the great cathedral, a structure of white granite veined with black, its spires reaching toward the heavens like judgment made stone.

A crowd had gathered—some solemn, others merry. Children held sugarfruit. An old man chewed his pie and shook his head. A merchant offered flasks for sale from under his cloak.

The executioner—a hooded man with arms like wrought iron—stood ready.

Bromrik read from the scroll as the condemned stood before the nooses. “Orlin the Smith, Callia the Singer, Meron of the Blade—you are judged by the Church of the Sacred Flame. Your crimes: heresy, violence against the cloth, blasphemy, murder. Final sentence: hanging by rope.”

The executioner added his voice: “‘Let not the flame be dulled by mercy, nor the gallows spared by doubt.’”

The nooses were slipped over their heads.

The lever was pulled.

Bromrik did not flinch as the three bodies dropped. The crowd murmured. Somewhere in the back, someone cheered.

Soon after, Bromrik turned and walked into the grand cathedral.

Inside the inquisition chamber—stone-walled, high-arched, with candlelight flickering across holy banners—he sat heavily in a chair across from a carved wooden desk. Moments later, a door opened, and Inquisitor Burnard entered. Tall, angular, dressed in a robe threaded with gold.

“Brother Bromrik,” Burnard said with a grin. “You’ve thinned the weeds again, I hear.”

“Three hung this morning,” Bromrik said, removing his gloves. “Their sins were not light.”

Burnard took out a decanter and poured deep red wine into two silver cups. “Your work brings strength to the city. Order. Certainty. The Flame does not thank lightly, but I do.”

He handed a cup to Bromrik, who took it with a grunt.

“To the Flame,” Burnard said, raising his.

“To the Flame,” Bromrik echoed, and drank.

The wine sat warm in their bellies as the flickering candlelight danced across the dark stone walls of the Inquisition chamber. A tapestry behind Burnard bore the symbol of the Sacred Flame—an eye weeping fire encircled by twelve rays, each said to represent a different virtue of obedience. The room was quiet now, save for the ticking of a wall-mounted water clock and the distant echo of cathedral bells.

Bromrik leaned back in his chair, stretching his thick legs out beneath the desk, boots thudding softly against stone.

“How far has the Flame reached?” he asked, his voice thick with wine and weariness. “I’ve seen sparks in backwoods shires and ash in noble courts, but what’s the realm’s true temperature?”

Burnard smiled at that, thin and sharp. “You’d be pleased, Brother. The Inquisition spreads further than ever before. Village by village, town by town. In the East, the crimson-robed Order of Emberlight now oversees judgment across six provinces. In the South, our agents have rooted out over three hundred declared pagans in the past year alone—most already tried and sentenced.”

Bromrik nodded, tapping the rim of his cup with a calloused thumb. “And the cities?”

Burnard gestured expansively. “Hollowford is purging its merchant quarter, where the old gods’ symbols still appeared in coin and cloth. In Ashwell, a full tribunal has replaced the magistracy—every civil dispute now weighed under the eye of the Sacred Flame. Even Lord Highwarden of Argenwatch now holds court with an Inquisitor at his right hand.”

Bromrik chuckled, deep and rough. “Not bad for a faith that was once whispered in ruins and scribbled in hidden tomes.”

Burnard poured himself more wine and sat back. “You’ve seen what conviction and fire can do. The old gods rot in their forgotten hollows. Their names are not spoken anymore—not by the living, at least.”

Bromrik leaned forward, voice low. “And the monasteries?”

Burnard’s eyes lit with a kind of fervor. “New ones rise every moon. Atop Mount Vire in the north, they build a monastery of black granite, said to house a library for the Flame’s full scripture. In the Ardent Plains, three new cloisters opened just this spring—each already has a

dozen novices chanting the Flame's litanies. We are not only punishing heresy, Brother. We are planting permanence."

Bromrik nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "Sowing fire."

"Indeed," said Burnard. "And in Ironhearth, we've begun formal schooling for the next generation of priests and inquisitors. Doctrines sharpened. Language of law refined. Even the children learn our creed now before they learn their own names."

Bromrik smiled with satisfaction. "Good. Then in time, we won't need to chase heresy. It will vanish before it ever has breath."

Burnard raised his cup again. "To a realm devout, and a flame eternal."

They drank.

In the hallway beyond, the bells tolled once more—no longer distant, but loud and near, a sound that rang like the voice of fire itself. The Sacred Flame was rising, and its servants—like Bromrik—were the hammer and smoke of its will.

The wine had settled in their bellies like coals, and still the air in the inquisition chamber burned with the heat of certainty. Bromrik leaned forward, elbows on the carved desk, his black beard shadowing the solemn lines of his face.

Burnard refilled his own cup and spoke with the calm of one recounting not horror, but order fulfilled.

"You've heard, I presume, of the fall of Hellens' king."

Bromrik's eyes narrowed. "I heard whispers. But not the truth of it."

Burnard nodded slowly. "Then let me give you truth. Not rumor, not distortion—truth in full. King Arlan was taken from his throne five months past. We had watched him for years—his disregard for tithe, his councils of secular scholars, his toleration of foreign shrines. His words cloaked in loyalty, but his heart wandered. He thought himself above the will of the Sacred Flame."

Bromrik grunted. "He forgot there is no rule above our Lord Father."

"Indeed." Burnard leaned back, fingers steepled. "The trial was held in the Cathedral Hall, beneath the high dome. Seven Inquisitors. Forty witnesses. The king stood not in robes, but in chains. His crimes were read: refusal of doctrine, protection of heretics, endorsement of forbidden writings. When the charges of spiritual treason were laid down, not even his guards defended him. And so, in the first light of morning, he and his family met judgment. Their heads rolled by the hand of Executioner Domin, beneath the shadow of the altar."

"And his line?" Bromrik asked.

“Erased,” Burnard said without hesitation. “By judgment of the Sacred Flame, his name was stricken from the rolls of history. Every volume bearing his ancestry was brought from the Grand Library and cast into the pyres. His treasury—cursed by gold stained with unbelief—was seized for the rebuilding of cloisters, schooling of priests, and outfitting of new inquisitorial chapters.”

Bromrik was silent for a moment, the weight of it all resting heavy in his bones. “And who rules Hellens now?”

Burnard smiled, but there was no warmth in it. “A steward of the Flame. High Canon Virelin. The city bends its knee to sacred law, not royal whim. There is no state but that which burns in the Flame. The altar is the crown now.”

He stood and walked to the arched window, looking down over the Cathedral plaza, where the gallows had been cleaned and the stone gutters still ran dark from the morning’s work.

“We are the law,” Burnard said quietly. “We are the breath of justice, the sword of order. The days of kings are over, Brother. The Sacred Flame rules now. And you, Bromrik, are one of its sharpest blades.”

Bromrik rose from his seat, feeling the weight of that recognition settle into his spine like steel. He looked down to the scroll in his belt. Names still waited. Judgment still called.

“I serve the will,” he said, voice low.

Burnard turned from the window. “Then carry it onward.”

And Bromrik left, cloak trailing behind him like smoke.

As the sun dipped lower beyond the stained-glass windows, the candlelight in the inquisitorial chamber flickered longer shadows. Burnard remained by the window, his fingers laced behind his back, his voice low but firm as if speaking to the stone itself.

“You’ve heard the name Virelin, I know,” he said. “But you’ve not yet seen the depth of his design.”

Bromrik shifted his weight, crossing his arms. “High Canon Virelin. First of the Ecclesiarchs. I know the title, not the man.”

Burnard nodded. “He rules now, not by sword or crown, but by vision. He speaks of a realm unified not just in law or tongue, but in soul. A thousand altars burning together, a single prayer rising from every city bell tower. He has redrawn provincial lines, dissolved ancient charters, and placed the Church in full command of grain routes and militia drafts. There is no petition, no coin, no oath now, that is not first offered to the altar.”

Bromrik’s eyes narrowed. “And the people follow?”

“They obey,” Burnard said. “Most. But Mordal…” He let the name settle like a weight on the air.

“Mordal?” Bromrik echoed.

“A city in the north,” Burnard replied. “Hard country. Traders, woodsmen, salt miners. Old ways linger there—stubborn. There’s a bishop in place, Father Helric, but his sermons ring half-hearted, and the inquisitors stationed there write of resistance. Passive now, but growing.”

“Pagan?”

“Not openly,” Burnard said. “No shrines, no stone idols in the woods. But the silence of their obedience is thick. There are murmurs of books hidden in cellars, of gatherings without candles, of names not in our scrolls. The Flame flickers in Mordal, not because it lacks fuel—but because the wind of doubt blows there.”

Bromrik grunted. “Then they need the rod, not the word.”

“They need a judgment that shakes the mountains,” Burnard said. “Virelin speaks of Mordal often. He fears contagion—spiritual erosion. If Mordal defies the Sacred Flame’s doctrine, others may follow.”

He turned then, looking Bromrik full in the face. “You may be sent there.”

Bromrik’s mouth curled into something between a scowl and a smile. “Then I will carry fire to the frost.”

Burnard raised his cup once more. “And may the Frost know the shape of flame.”

The cobbled path that twisted up into the nobles’ quarter was cleaner than most, lined with old cypress trees and iron lanterns that glowed even in daylight. Bromrik’s boots struck hard on the stone as he reached the grand arch of Lord Agander’s residence, a towering manor of red brick and polished bronze inlay. He knocked once, hard, and waited.

The door opened slowly. Agander stood tall, dressed in a gold-hemmed tunic, his graying beard cut close, eyes cautious.

“You,” he said flatly.

“Aye, me.” Bromrik stepped past the threshold without waiting for permission. “I’m not here for pleasantries.”

Agander shut the door and followed him into the sitting room, where Bromrik dropped his travel cloak across a cushioned chair and pulled the scroll from his belt. He opened it, tracing a thick finger down to a name.

“You’re on the list,” he said, voice low. “Which means trouble.”

Agander paled, but stood firm. “That list was written by men who want my inheritance. Jealous relatives who spat lies because I left them nothing. It’s slander, not sin.”

Bromrik glanced up. “That may be true. But the ink is dry, and once your name’s down, the weight of judgment follows close behind.”

Agander swallowed. “I’m telling you, Inquisitor—I’ve done no wrong.”

Bromrik narrowed his eyes. “Yet here you are, accused of vilifying the name of the Lord Father, refusing faith, and speaking in the tongue of the damned.” He let the silence grow thick. “And I have authority to see it through.”

Agander stiffened. “So what are you here for, then? A hanging?”

Bromrik leaned back, lighting his pipe. He puffed once, exhaled through his nose like a resting bull.

“No. I’m a practical man. You want this judgment to vanish? Then perhaps a modest donation. Say… five hundred gold.”

Agander studied him, incredulous. “You mean to buy off a charge of heresy?”

“I mean to overlook the name,” Bromrik said. “It was probably written in anger, not truth. And I see no cross defiled in your house. But you know how these things go. Accusations grow mold fast.”

The noble hesitated. Then, with a huff of frustration, he walked to a gilded cabinet, opened a small iron safe within, and began counting out coins. The clinking echoed in the room like falling chains.

He placed the heavy purse on the table. “There. Five hundred gold. You’ll strike me off that list?”

Bromrik smiled, reached for his wine. “Consider yourself blessed by circumstance.”

Agander poured him a glass of his best red—deep, dark, expensive. Bromrik downed it in one go, stuffed the coin pouch into his belt, and took the scroll from the table.

He rose.

“No prayers needed, then?” Agander asked coldly.

Bromrik tapped his pipe against his boot. “Lord Father’s will moves in mysterious ways. Today, it moved through you.”

And with that, he left—out into the sunlit street, list in hand, coin in belt, and not a drop of guilt in his stride.

The wagon rattled into the bustling heart of the merchant quarter, its streets humming with the clamor of trade, the shouts of stall vendors, and the distant sound of forge-hammers. Bromrik steered his mule toward a squat, timber-framed building with an iron sign swinging above its door—The Mucky Fox—faded red paint depicting a grinning fox soaked in ale.

Smoke curled from the chimney, and the scent of roasted pork and pipeweed hung thick in the air.

Inside, the tavern was warm and crowded. A bard strummed a lute near the hearth, ignored by most. Bromrik found a corner table near a brick oven and threw down his travel cloak. He barked at the tavern wench, “Pork, bread, whatever stew’s on, and your strongest ale—and have the bath drawn, my back’s stiff as old stone.”

As he sat, gnawing on a hunk of garlic-smeared bread and drinking from a broad tankard of dark amber ale, a pair of dwarves joined him at the table, nodding courteously before settling in. They were well-dressed for working folk—cloaks of blue and brown, thick boots, and braids in their beards.

The male dwarf offered a callused hand. “Tholgar Goldpick. Jeweler and stone assessor.”

The female dwarf smiled warmly. “I’m Brelda, his wife. I keep the books and run the shop when he’s off banging gems with a hammer.”

Bromrik clasped Tholgar's hand with a grunt of approval. "Bromrik Stonemantle. Inquisitor."

Brelda blinked. "By the Flame! You don't say."

Tholgar raised his brows. "An Inquisitor, eh? Well, then I'll drink to the Lord Father keeping the fires lit, and the sinners twitchin'."

They clanked their mugs together and drank deep. Bromrik let out a satisfied sigh and leaned back.

"So," he asked, "what's the word in Hellens these days? Any murmurs I should hear?"

Tholgar grunted. "The guilds are grumbling again. Taxes are high, even for the honest traders. Saw a caravan turned back at the gate two days ago—claimed their prayer ledgers were 'incomplete.' Guess the Flame burns brighter when gold's tossed on it."

Brelda added, "There's whispers too, up by the Weaver's Row. Some say a new preacher's come from the east. Preaches of 'balance,' not fire. Some old folk have been listening."

Bromrik narrowed his eyes. "A heretic?"

"Could be." Tholgar shrugged. "Or just another loud beggar with a tricked tongue. Either way, not many ears for that kind in the lower quarter. Not since the gallows creaked last week."

Bromrik puffed his pipe slowly. "I'll sniff it out if it stinks."

Brelda smiled cautiously. "We're faithful folk, don't mistake us. Temple every dusk. My cousin even donated his goat last Emberfast."

Bromrik chuckled. "Then you've no worry from me. I don't carry the axe for kin who know the rites."

The bath was soon ready, and Bromrik excused himself. As he eased into the steaming water, soot and blood washing off his skin, he let himself relax for a moment. The warmth soaked into his joints, and he muttered a brief prayer between mouthfuls of ale.

Later, he returned to his room above the tavern, the sounds of coin and conversation still buzzing below. He opened the tome and read a passage under his breath before sleep took him.

"Let the faithful rest, for their labors are the stones of the Kingdom. Let the flames guard their dreams, and burn away the heresies of tomorrow."

And the candle burned low into the quiet of the night.

Bromrik guided the mule slowly along the tree-lined road that sloped into a wide meadow. The sun hung high, golden and warm, casting long shadows through the leaves. Birds chirped and flitted across branches, and the air smelled of wild thyme and damp bark. For the first

time in days, the dwarf felt something akin to peace—though he knew well enough not to trust it.

The path curved gently between flowering bushes and old stone markers when suddenly, the glint of polished steel caught his eye. A tall figure stood in the road, unmoving, clad head to toe in heavy plate. A red tabard bearing the flame-mark of the Sacred Order draped over the armor, and a mace nearly the length of Bromrik himself rested in his hand.

Bromrik pulled the reins. The mule snorted and halted.

The armored figure raised a gauntleted hand. “Halt! State your name and allegiance!”

Bromrik squinted, then grinned beneath his black beard. “Peace, brother. I am Bromrik Stonemantle, Inquisitor of the Sacred Flame. My allegiance is to the Lord Father and the flame that burns His will.”

The knight stepped forward, visor still down. “You’re far from Cathedral Hills, Inquisitor.”

Bromrik nodded. “So I am. Been cleaning up rot in Hellens. Now the path leads me north.”

The knight removed his helm, revealing a scarred human face—young, but weathered. “Sir Callen Durein, Knight-Adjudicator of the Southern March.”

They clasped forearms in silent respect.

“I’m in pursuit,” Callen said. “Three heretics escaped judgment two days past. Pagan whisperers, tree-worshippers from the eastern marshes. Cowards, all of them. Slipped through a chapel sweep and ran under moonlight.”

“What were their crimes?” Bromrik asked, puffing once from his pipe.

“Desecration. They dug up relics, shattered icons, cursed the name of the Lord Father in front of the congregation. One burned a priest’s bedroll while he slept.”

Bromrik grunted. “The kind that deserve not gallows but fire.”

“So I intend to give them,” Callen replied. “They took the old south trail through the fens. If I move swift, I’ll catch them before dusk.”

Bromrik recited a line from the tome, more out of habit than ceremony. “‘Let not the unclean root spread in the soil of the faithful. Cut it out, and salt the wound.’”

“Amen,” Callen said with a nod.

They touched wrists in blessing and parted without further word—Callen disappearing into the thickets with steel boots and purpose, and Bromrik climbing back onto the cart, the wheels creaking as he resumed his slow, steady course.

The sun hung low in the sky, casting golden light across the meadows on either side of the road. Bromrik’s cart rolled along peacefully until the mule let out a nervous whinny. A figure stood ahead—broad-shouldered, armored in mismatched steel and leather, with a spear lazily at his side.

The man stepped forward, slapped the mule's snout, and barked, "Off the road."

The mule halted, snorting, and Bromrik rose to his feet. "What in the Lord's name are you doing, maggot? Touch my beast again and you'll answer to more than my tongue."

The man looked up. His face was scarred, jaw tight with hate. "You're one of them. Inquisitor. Sacred Flame."

Bromrik squinted. "I am. Bromrik Stonemantle. You've got sharp eyes, and a dull brain if you think this ends well for you."

"I'm Irhont," the man said. "Veteran of the Hill Wars. I saw what your kind did in Greyvale—burned it to ash because a single child refused to kneel. I saw the Temple of Alden razed for 'harboring apostates' when they were only healers. You people murdered the old monk Terill, the one who sheltered me when my battalion fell."

Bromrik took his pipe from his teeth and spat. "Terill was a dissenter. Alden refused inspection. You call that justice? You know nothing of the weight we carry. The Order saves more than it destroys."

Irhont's flail came up. "I will see your kind buried. One by one."

Bromrik leapt from the cart, axe in hand. "Come then, blasphemer. Let's see who's writing scripture today."

The two charged. Irhont swung wide, but Bromrik ducked low and slammed his shoulder into the man's gut, knocking him back. Steel clanged as their weapons met again—Irhont's spear fast and cruel, Bromrik's axe heavy and punishing.

"You think your cause is holy?" Irhont snarled, backing Bromrik against a fencepost. "It's rot. Fire and ash dressed in holy words!"

Bromrik roared and shoved back. "And you're no better—a wandering blade with no law but your own bitterness!"

He hacked low, catching Irhont's knee, and the man fell with a cry. Blood soaked the grass. Irhont raised his spear again, but Bromrik struck his arm, sending it spinning away.

Irhont lay gasping. Bromrik stood over him, axe raised, chest heaving.

"You preach death to my Order," Bromrik growled. "But only the Lord Father decides when a man's flame is snuffed."

He smashed his axe into his chest with a sickening crunch.

"Die away, Irhont. Your bones'll feed the crows today."

He returned to the cart, muttering prayers between gulps of wine, and the wheels rolled on.

The forest grew thick around the cart as Bromrik guided his mule along the narrow, winding path. Sunlight filtered in soft patches through the high canopy, painting the earth in gold and green. After nearly an hour of travel, he came upon moss-covered ruins—what had once been a lord's keep, now just the memory of stones. Broken columns leaned like weary old men, and twisted roots wrapped themselves into what remained of the stone foundation.

Bromrik pulled the reins. "Time for a belly rest, ye stubborn beast."

He climbed off, took his wine skin and a small sack of food, and settled himself in the tall grass nearby. He chewed on a piece of dried meat, followed by some leftover potatoes and wilted salad from his last stop. The wine was warm, but it soothed his throat. He puffed his pipe, letting the smoke curl into the treetops, then lay back on the grass, the sky a distant dome of shifting blue through green branches.

Sleep came like a stone falling in a well.

When he woke, the sun had moved behind the treetops. He groaned, stretched, packed up his things, and returned to the road. The mule greeted him with indifference.

An hour later, the road widened where two trails crossed, and there stood a figure—short, with a wide pack and a few colorful birds perched on it. The halfling had dark shoulder-length hair, loose clothes made of bark-brown cloth, and a peaceable air about him.

Bromrik raised a hand. "Well met, stranger. Where you headed?"

The halfling turned, smiled. “Nowhere in particular. Just wandering the paths. I’m Pippin. Forest-dweller, bird-friend, sun-chaser.”

“Bird-friend, eh?” Bromrik eyed the birds on the halfling’s pack, who chirped contentedly. “I seek Hollowmoon village. Can you guide me?”

“Oh, it’s down the south path,” Pippin said, pointing with a stick. “Past the old well, keep left where the stones are carved. You’ll smell their bread baking before you see their houses.”

Bromrik narrowed his eyes. “Tell me, Pippin. Are you a follower of the Sacred Flame?”

Pippin tilted his head. “What is that?”

Bromrik’s tone hardened. “The Lord Father. The guiding fire. The only true path of the realm.”

“I’ve... never heard of it,” Pippin said gently. “I live by the forest. I walk with the wind. Nature is my guide, not doctrine.”

Bromrik’s brow furrowed. “So you are a pagan, then. A forest child, talking to trees and beasts.”

“I’m not a pagan,” Pippin replied. “I’m just me. I don’t harm, I don’t meddle. I keep to peace.”

Bromrik gripped his pipe between his teeth, exhaled hard. “By the Sacred Flame I should put you out of your confusion, if not your misery.”

Pippin took a step back. “You’ve no right to force your fire on those who choose peace.”

Then, quick as a rabbit, the halfling darted off into the trees, the birds fluttering after him.

Bromrik spat on the road. “Damn forest-born... they think moss is mother and the sun’s a god. They ought to be taught proper doctrine like decent folk.”

He climbed back on the cart and steered the mule forward, eyes set toward Hollowmoon.

As the sky dimmed under a thick canopy of stormclouds, Bromrik guided his cart to a stop beside a crumbling patch of stone ruins overtaken by ivy and moss. The air smelled of damp earth and dusk. He climbed down with a grunt, stretched his thick limbs, and took a long pull from his wineskin.

The wind whispered through the leaves—and with it came the sound of footsteps.

From the shadows of the fallen archway stepped a robed figure. The man—or what resembled a man—stood tall and gaunt. His robes were deep crimson and gold, threaded with black sigils that glimmered with unnatural shimmer. In his forehead glowed an emerald, dim and pulsing like a heart. His eyes were pitch-dark, as if the stars themselves had fled from them.

Bromrik tensed, hand resting on his axe.

“Ah,” the figure said, voice smooth as smoke. “A hound of the Sacred Flame. I wondered when one of your kind would stumble across the broken places.”

Bromrik narrowed his eyes. “You wear a priest’s robes, but that stone in your skull reeks of foul rites. What sect are you?”

The figure bowed mockingly. “I am Drazir of the Dark Order of Dawn. We walk where the sun dares not burn. Our gospel is whispered in shadow, and our sanctuaries lie beneath the world. You burn your books to control the mind. We shatter minds to free them.”

Bromrik spat into the grass. “Heathen gibberish.”

Drazir raised both arms. “We worship what crawls beneath—the Thousand-Eyed Hunger, the Mouthless Choir, the Weeping Core. Our sermons are carved into bone, our offerings scribed in the ash of forgotten kings. You cling to your flame, dwarf. We embrace the abyss.”

Bromrik’s lip curled into a snarl. “By the Path of the Flame, I cleanse your filth.”

He drew his axe. Drazir responded with a sharp chant in a tongue that made the earth shiver. Shadows bent toward him, gathering into claws. A burst of black fire erupted from his palm, scorching a trench through the air.

Bromrik rolled aside, the blast catching the edge of his cloak. He charged, swinging hard. His axe met the shimmer of a ward—Drazir’s robes glowed with runes as the weapon struck. The impact flung Bromrik backward.

The ground cracked at Drazir’s feet. Tendrils of inky darkness surged from the soil, lashing at Bromrik, one catching his arm and burning through cloth to sear the flesh beneath.

“You will fall like the others,” Drazir hissed, “your soul a flame snuffed in the pit.”

Bromrik roared and surged forward, axe gripped in both hands. “The Lord Father’s light burns deeper than your damned pit!”

He feinted left, then drove his axe upward, catching the robed figure in the side. Blood—not red but oily black—splashed across the stone. Drazir shrieked, his chant breaking. Another swing followed, cracking ribs beneath gold-threaded fabric. As the dark priest raised one hand for another spell, Bromrik headbutted him with a thud that shattered the emerald in his forehead.

The figure collapsed, shrieking in a voice that wasn’t wholly his own. With one final stroke, Bromrik drove the axe deep into his chest. The howling ceased.

The wind quieted. The ruins stilled.

Bromrik wiped his axe clean on the grass, chest heaving. “May the worms feast on your gospel, Drazir.”

He returned to his cart, lit his pipe, and muttered a prayer to ward off the stink of evil. Above him, lightning rolled through the clouds. Behind him, the ruin returned to silence.

The wagon creaked as Bromrik urged the mule down a narrow path flanked by twisted trees. He muttered curses at his own sense of direction, realizing he had veered from the road marked toward Hollowmoon. The forest thickened until suddenly it broke—a clearing lay ahead, moonlight pooling like cold silver on the grass.

And there, towering in the center of the glade, stood a beast unlike any Bromrik had seen.

Seven long necks, scaled in shades of soot and ember, rose like coiled pillars. Seven heads—each adorned with a small thorns and crowned with cold eyes—turned in unison toward him. The creature hissed, its breath foul with the stink of death and fire.

Bromrik froze, heart pounding. “By the Lords of all Heavens of the Sacred Flame,” he whispered, reaching for his axe. “The devil has crawled from the abyss... Lord Father save me.”

The beast did not charge. Instead, its seven heads began to sway, and then—to Bromrik’s astonishment—speak. Each head spoke one word at a time, seamlessly passing the sentence from maw to maw in a chorus of unnatural rhythm.

“We... are... the... Mouth... of... the... Underdark.”

The next sentence came smoother still.

“We... eat... the... light... that... blinds... truth.”

Bromrik narrowed his eyes, axe in hand. “I know not what abyss you’ve slithered from, wyrm, but you’ll find little prey here.”

The beast’s heads twisted, serpent-like, circling him with words.

“You... serve... a... lie... forged... in... fire.”

Bromrik stepped from the cart, the tome of the Sacred Flame thumping against his belt. “I serve the truth written in divine breath. You speak only in riddles and blasphemy.”

“Flame... consumes... doubt... and... calls... it... faith.”

“You mistake purification for ignorance,” Bromrik barked. “Doubt is a spark—faith is the fire that outlasts it.”

One of the beast’s heads leaned low, yellow eyes glittering. “Faith... demands... silence... from... the... thinking... soul.”

Bromrik ground his teeth. “And what do you offer, beast? Chaos? Worship of things without name that dwell in shadows? What meaning is there in the bowels of the Underdark?”

The heads answered slowly, solemnly now.

“Freedom... from... order... that... devours... the... spirit.”

“A spirit untethered is a spirit lost,” Bromrik retorted. “The Sacred Flame burns because it is guided. Yours wallows in the dark and calls it clarity.”

“You... burn... the... wise... and... praise... the... fools.”

“The wise who praise evil are fools already. And the fools who walk the path of the Flame may yet rise.”

The wyrm hissed, its seven voices growling as one.

“We... return... soon... to... rule... this... world.”

Bromrik raised his axe, fire in his eyes.

“Then let that world wait. You’ll not cross the threshold tonight.”

The beast did not attack. It hissed again, its bodies slinking back into the mist of the clearing, disappearing as if swallowed by the earth itself.

Bromrik stood alone beneath the cold moonlight, breath catching in his chest. He let out a slow sigh, then climbed back onto his cart.

As the wheels rolled again through the forest path, he muttered, “Even shadows test the faithful.”

And the Sacred Flame still burned in his chest.

The road narrowed into a twisted stretch of crooked oaks and gnarled roots, the sun long since buried behind the canopy. Bromrik's pipe was low, the last coals flickering, when the mule let out a sharp, braying whinny. The cart jolted to a halt.

From the thickets on either side of the road, shadows slipped free. Six figures emerged, hunched and swaying—skeletal, rotted things with flesh stretched thin like brittle parchment across their bones. Their eyes burned like dying candles, a pale yellow glow pulsing in their sockets. Their mouths hung open, blackened tongues twitching as they let out low, guttural moans that echoed like the wind through crypts.

"By the Father's flame," Bromrik growled, leaping from the cart. "What filth crawls from the grave tonight?"

The mule screamed as two of the creatures pounced, clawing at its flanks. The poor beast bucked, trying to throw off the weight of bone and decay. Bromrik wasted no time—his axe came free from its harness with a sharp metallic rasp.

The first creature lunged at him, swinging skeletal arms like flails. Bromrik ducked the swipe and planted a heavy boot into its ribcage, cracking bones as it flew back into the ditch. Another came from his left—he turned, catching it mid-stride with a swing of his axe that sheared its jaw clean off and split its shoulder to collarbone. It wailed, a pitiful screech, before falling into a twitching heap.

The mule kicked loose one of the attackers, but the other had sunk its teeth deep into the beast's neck. Blood spilled. Bromrik cursed and drove forward, burying his axe in the skull of

the one still gnawing. With a crunch of rotted bone and splatter of black ichor, the creature fell limp.

One of the undead came at him from behind, claws raking down his back. Bromrik spun, grunting in pain, and smashed the butt of his axe into its chest, then hooked its spine and wrenched it to the ground. He stomped hard on its head until it split like rotten fruit.

Two remained. One screeched and lunged again—Bromrik blocked its swing with the haft of his axe, then brought the blade up through its ribs in a vicious, upward arc. The last creature backed off, emitting a strange clicking sound from deep in its throat.

Bromrik stepped forward, bloodied and snarling.

“Come on, then. If you think the dark’s stronger than the Flame, let’s find out.”

The thing rushed—and Bromrik didn’t wait. He stepped to the side, spun on his heel, and cleaved through its spine in a clean horizontal blow. The body dropped in two pieces, twitching.

He stood panting, black fluid on his boots, his axe dripping rot. The mule, bleeding but alive, let out a trembling snort.

“Easy now, beast. Easy,” Bromrik muttered, patting the mule’s flank. “We’ve seen worse. And there’s worse yet to come.”

He climbed back onto the cart, wincing from the scratch down his back, and lit the pipe again. Smoke curled through the night air as he whispered a short prayer.

“Flame of the Father, guard me through the tombs that walk.”

Hollowmoon

Hollowmoon lay nestled in a cleft of wooded hills, the trees thick with moss and the roofs of the village low and slanted, as if to keep their secrets hidden beneath eaves of damp straw. The place smelled of earth and old rain, with chimneys puffing quiet trails of smoke into the dusk. No guards, no walls—just a single well in the square, a worn shrine to the Sacred Flame with half its carvings faded, and homes arranged in a lazy crescent around the village green.

Bromrik’s cart rumbled through the narrow path that passed for a main street, mule wheezing and hooves slipping in the mud. He pulled the cart to a stop beside the well, opened his satchel, and removed the list. His eyes ran across the page. Three names. Surnames alike. Kin of the same family, it seemed.

He dismounted, axe at his belt, tome under his arm. He went to the first door—oak, warped with time—and knocked. A man answered, wiry with silver-streaked hair and eyes like flint.

Bromrik ordered him to step outside without explanation. The second house yielded a stout woman in her middle years, who stared in silence at Bromrik's tabard. The third was a girl no older than twenty, fear clear in her eyes. One by one, he marched them to the house of the eldest and ordered them inside.

They stood in a row in the low-ceilinged room, fire burning weakly in the hearth. Bromrik paced before them, his pipe tucked away, tome now open and resting in his thick palms.

"You stand accused under the weight of the Sacred Flame's doctrine," he began, voice gravelled with smoke and command. "Jarnel Redd. Esla Redd. Luma Redd. Charges: heresy of high order by the slaying of a churchman, theft from consecrated ground, desecration of the sacred cross, and the vilification of the Lord Father's name. These are not simple lapses. These are wounds to the realm – punishable by execution."

Jarnel, the eldest, stepped forward first. "I never killed no priest," he said. "We were there—yes—but the man fell from his own horse during the storm. It was an accident. We didn't touch him."

"Didn't touch?" Bromrik muttered. "Then what of the stolen reliquary, reported missing from his satchel? What of the symbols of the Flame found broken near the place of his fall?"

Esla spoke up next, voice low. "The priest insulted our family. Said our mother was a woodswitch, spat at our father's grave. We confronted him, but we never laid hand to weapon. If his belongings were taken, someone else must've done it after. You judge us on hatred, not truth."

Bromrik's hand twitched at his tome. He raised it slightly, letting the sigil of the Sacred Flame catch the hearth's light. "The Flame is not swayed by rumor. It sees what is. And it sees offense."

Finally, Luma—the youngest—spoke. "We buried the cross because he desecrated our land. He came and salted our fields, said it was cursed. My brother burned the symbols out of rage, not heresy."

Bromrik paused. Silence hung in the air like a blade.

"One speaks of accident. Another of insult. The last of rage," he said. "Each excuses the defilement of holy ground. Each draws a line away from guilt. But it is not for man to excuse what the Flame condemns."

He closed the tome, snapping the leather shut with finality.

"We proceed now to examine your souls, and the truth beneath them."

He lit his pipe and leaned against the hearth, studying the trio.

The room was stifling with tension. Outside, the wind stirred the eaves, and faint footsteps could be heard as villagers dared not approach but could not help hovering near the walls.

Inside, Bromrik's breath came heavy through his nose as he blew smoke through his beard and regarded the Redd family with the weary contempt of a man long used to judgment.

"You'll answer to me now," Bromrik said. "Not with excuses, but with your souls. One lie will turn the Flame's mercy into wrath."

He turned to Jarnel first.

"Where were you the night of the priest's death?"

Jarnel's jaw tensed. "At the old barn on the west hill. We'd gone up there to speak with him about his words—nothing more. He rode off in a storm. We found him dead hours later, half-trampled by his own horse."

"You followed him," Bromrik said coldly. "A priest of the Flame alone in the dark, with three from the same house who bear old grudges. Convenient tale."

Jarnel said nothing. Bromrik turned his attention to Esla.

"You desecrated the shrine behind your house," Bromrik said. "The Flame was found covered with soot. Symbols smashed. Say why."

Esla lifted her chin. "That shrine was placed where my husband's ashes were buried. Without consent. The priest ignored my pleas to move it."

"So you took the hammer," Bromrik muttered, "and chose blasphemy."

"I chose my dead," Esla replied, eyes burning. "He had no right to plant Flame over grief."

Bromrik scowled. "Grief is not license."

He turned to Luma, youngest and shaking.

"You," he said. "Did you hold the fire to the priest's travel papers?"

Luma's lip trembled. "He told me our family's sins would be carved into a wall at the chapel. That I'd never find work. That I was the child of heretics. I burned the letters."

"And so you confessed," Bromrik said. "Three parts to this tale, and all of them lead to rebellion. You bury crosses, break shrines, and burn church records. The Flame teaches—"

He opened the tome, reading aloud: "'The hand that wounds the House of Light must be laid bare to fire, that it might learn pain before darkness claims it.'"

The room darkened slightly as the hearth waned. Bromrik looked up from the page.

"There is still your repentance," he said, voice low. "If you kneel and confess all, and name others who whispered poison in your ears, you may yet be spared the full wrath of the gallows."

Jarnel stiffened. "You'd have me betray folk who did nothing wrong?"

Bromrik's voice was calm and heavy. "No man innocent fears his own tongue. But a man who keeps secrets burns."

He stepped back, arms crossed.

"I will return in an hour," he said. "You will use the time to think well on whether the rope or the truth is your better friend."

He stepped out, leaving the three alone with the fire and the creak of timbers whispering their own judgment.

When Bromrik returned, the candlelight had dimmed, and the hearth was but a pool of embers. The three villagers stood where he had left them, though now Jarnel's brow was damp with sweat, and Luma's eyes were red and swollen from crying. Only Esla seemed unchanged—resolute, arms crossed, staring into the fire like it might offer counsel.

Bromrik closed the door behind him and walked heavily to the table, where his tome lay. He sat, letting the silence draw out until even the wind seemed to hold its breath.

"Well?" he asked at last. "Which of you has chosen salvation?"

Jarnel's voice came first. "I will confess to quarreling with the priest. We exchanged heated words. I called him a vulture. But I never struck him. I never wished him dead."

"You called a servant of the Flame a vulture," Bromrik said, writing with his quill. "Insult to a priest—confessed. And you, Luma?"

She wrung her hands. "I did burn the papers. But it was fear, not hate. I didn't know what else to do. No one listens to us. They only command."

"Fear is not immunity," Bromrik said. "You acted in defiance, regardless of why."

Finally, his eyes fell upon Esla.

"And you? Still proud? Still ready to hammer stone in memory of your husband while the Lord Father watches?"

Esla's voice was cool. "I would rather die than kneel before an order that burns villages and buries grief beneath its altars."

Bromrik inhaled through his nose, slow and deep. "So be it."

He stood and lifted his tome again, reading aloud with practiced certainty.

"'Where three are judged, and only two show contrition, let the Flame test their truth by trial, and let the unrepentant fall into ash.'"

He closed the book with a dull thud.

“Tomorrow morning,” he said, “you will all be brought to the chapel square. There, your fate will be decided. One last chance remains, under public gaze. The Flame does not need silence—it thrives in witness.”

Jarnel spoke, a tremor in his voice. “You mean for them to watch?”

“Yes,” Bromrik replied. “So others may learn what becomes of the defiant.”

He looked each of them in the eye, one by one.

“Sleep as well as you can. At dawn, we see whether the Flame chooses mercy… or memory.”

He turned and left the house without another word, stepping into the Hollowmoon night, where clouds veiled the stars and wind rustled through the trees like the whisper of things long dead.

The morning came heavy with mist, a low veil trailing between the crooked cottages and the moss-covered stones of Hollowmoon’s chapel square. Villagers had gathered quietly, drawn by the whispered rumors of judgment. Mothers clutched children. Elders leaned on sticks. A soft dread hung in the air like damp wool.

Bromrik stood before them in full cloak and chain, axe strapped to his belt, the Tome of Flame opened upon a broad stone lectern before the chapel. Beside him stood Father Illin, the village priest—nervous, gaunt, shifting his eyes between the crowd and the condemned.

Jarnel, Luma, and Esla stood in a row, hands bound. Each bore the marks of a sleepless night, though each faced the crowd with their own flavor of resolve. Jarnel trembled but held his chin high. Luma wept quietly. Esla alone stared ahead, face stony and unyielding.

Bromrik raised his hand and silence fell.

“People of Hollowmoon,” he called, his voice deep and commanding. “You have gathered to witness judgment—not by my will, but by the law of the Sacred Flame, and the order that binds this realm in the light of our Lord Father.”

He turned a page and began to read.

“Three stood accused. Three faced the Tome’s burden. And three were weighed. One admitted insult to a priest of the Order. One confessed to destruction of sanctified writ. One showed no remorse, and even now scorns the Flame.”

He snapped the book shut.

“Such deeds, left unpunished, poison the soul of a village. But this is not vengeance. It is purification.”

A murmur passed through the crowd. Some turned their faces. Others looked on, solemn and dry-eyed.

Bromrik looked to the priest. “Do you object, Father Illin?”

The priest hesitated. “No,” he said softly. “The law is clear.”

Bromrik nodded, then stepped down from the lectern and approached the condemned.

“To walk against the Flame,” he said, “is to burn in its wake. Yet in burning, you may light the path for others.”

He gestured to the executioner, who led the three to the raised wooden scaffold beside the chapel—old, worn, and long unused. Ropes waited like silent serpents from the beam.

As Jarnel climbed the steps, he muttered a prayer. Luma stumbled, sobbing, but was steadied by a guard. Esla walked last, unbowed, her eyes scanning the crowd, perhaps seeking someone, or perhaps daring them to look away.

The executioner approached Bromrik for the final word. Bromrik took a breath, his hand resting on the tome.

“In the name of the Sacred Flame, and by order of the Inquisition, judgment is passed.”

The lever was pulled.

As the bodies dropped, a single raven cried from the roof of the chapel. A hush held the square like frost. Even Bromrik stood unmoving for a long moment, his eyes fixed on the gallows, unreadable.

Then he turned, gathered his book, and walked away through the parting crowd, pipe already between his teeth.

The cart wheels creaked over the rocky path as Bromrik left Hollowmoon behind. The rising sun cut spears of light through the morning mist, yet the warmth failed to touch his bones. He sat heavier than before—pipe unlit, wine untouched. The tome lay closed at his side, for once not cradled in his lap. Smoke rose from a cottage chimney somewhere behind him, and in his mind’s eye, the scaffold still stood.

A crow passed overhead. Another circled back the way he had come.

In the village square, Father Illin stood before the scaffold alone. The crowd had dispersed, their silence more suffocating than any protest would have been. Mothers hurried children inside. The baker left loaves on doorsteps without speaking. At the well, no one gathered.

Even the priest, loyal as he had been, could not meet his own reflection in the chapel’s bronze basin. He had seen judgment, but what he felt now was not peace—it was a hollow ring, the kind that echoed when a bell cracked but was still made to toll.

Back on the road, Bromrik halted the mule at a bend where the pines thinned. He stepped down, boots crunching frost and stone. The air was cool. Too clean. He fumbled for his wine skin, took a long pull, and lit his pipe with shaking hands.

The prayer rose to his lips almost by habit, yet he hesitated.

Instead, he sat on a flat stone, the silence of the woods pressing in like a second cloak. He looked at the bloodstained pages of his tome, the places where verdicts had been written, the names struck through with red ink. Esla. Jarnel. Luma.

They had been guilty. Hadn’t they?

He grunted, shook his head, and stared into the trees. But something followed him now, unseen, curling like smoke under his thoughts. A question.

Where does the weight of justice fall when no hand is left clean?

The Sacred Flame burned. But even the purest fire left ashes. And Bromrik—he was beginning to wonder how much of him remained unburned.

He got back on the cart, reins in hand, and muttered to the mule.

“Let’s move on, beast. There’s still names on the list.”

But his voice lacked the iron it once held.

The road ahead curved into darker woods.

The forest road narrowed to a winding path where the trees grew thick and heavy, their branches twisting above like tangled fingers. Bromrik sat in the wagon, the reins slack in his hands as the mule trudged forward with the slow pace of a creature long used to its master’s silence. The dwarf’s beard was flecked with pipe ash, his eyes sunk beneath a heavy brow, and his lips moved with a low murmur that only the woods might hear.

"Justice... Justice must be served. That's what I was taught," he said aloud, his voice low and coarse. "When I was a lad in Khordin, Father said it daily. ‘Truth is a torch, lad—burns the hand that carries it, but lights the way for others.’ And I carried it. Through snow and war, through sin and shadow. I carried it even when it meant burying axe in neck, when prayers were drowned by screams."

He pulled the wine skin to his lips but didn't drink. The weight of it pressed against his thigh like a stone.

"But..." he whispered, glancing to the woods as if some spirit there might offer him counsel. "But they beg. They plead. And I feel... something. Guilt? Is that what it is? Or weakness? I shouldn’t feel guilt. Guilt is for the sinner. I do not sin—I carry out the will of the Sacred Flame."

Still the words rang hollow.

"They were liars. Heretics. They spat on the word of Lord Father. Hid books beneath floorboards. Prayed to trees. Mocked monks. If judgment doesn’t fall on them, who then? Who pays for the rot?”

A silence hung for a moment as the cart jostled over a bump, and the tome on the seat beside him slid, thumping softly against his hip. His hand rested on it, fingers tracing the worn leather of its cover.

"Yet even I... even I question. Why?" His voice dropped, almost a rasp. "Is doubt creeping into the vessel, or is the vessel cracking?"

The mule snorted, shaking its harness.

Bromrik looked up. The sky above was overcast, but a shaft of sunlight broke through the canopy, falling across the road ahead like a sign etched in gold.

He stared at it for a long while. Then he breathed deep, as if inhaling something more than air—strength, perhaps, or certainty.

“No,” he said. “No. I do not crack. I burn. I am the fire’s hand. The Sacred Flame is not to be doubted. It is the pillar of truth. What I do, I do not as Bromrik the dwarf. I do it as instrument of His holy will. When I swing the axe, it is the Lord Father who weighs the blow. When I pass judgment, it is not my voice, but the echo of the first flame.”

He gripped the reins tighter and lifted his chin.

“Justice lies not in mercy. It lies in obedience. The Flame guides. The Flame purifies. The Flame alone decides who lives and who burns. And I—am its vessel.”

With that, he cracked the reins and grabbed the wine skin, pouring it down his throat.

The mule grunted and picked up pace. The trees bowed overhead, and the road bent forward into whatever judgment lay ahead.

Barnhill

The wind sweeping through Barnhill’s narrow stone streets carried a sullen weight. Bromrik's cart rattled toward the monastery, past townsfolk who avoided his eyes. The monastery loomed at the city’s edge, old and severe, its black shutters and watchtower long weathered by storms—natural and otherwise. Upon arrival, the iron-banded gates creaked open, revealing a small company of Sacred Flame knights already waiting.

Three of them stepped forward—Sir Mallien, lean and hawk-eyed; Brother Gorran, stocky and grim-faced; and young Thelric, his armor still bright, his faith still untested. Bromrik climbed down from his cart and gave a nod.

“The names,” he said, pulling out the sealed list from his belt. “They belong to demons now, if what’s written holds true. Five in all. Cultists. Evokers of darkness.”

Sir Mallien took the parchment and scanned the names: Elesna Varn, a weaver; Old Herlim, a once-respected historian; Jerron and Mave, a farmer couple; and a boy of sixteen winters named Taln, apprentice to the village healer.

“The townsfolk whispered of shadows moving in their homes,” said Bromrik. “Of unnatural lights in the forest and carved sigils under floorboards. The Order of Sacred Flame hears every whisper.”

With no more delay, the knights rode into Barnhill. One by one, the accused were taken under torchlight, bound in heavy manacles and dragged through the monastery gates. Mave screamed curses in a language unknown. Taln wept. Old Herlim muttered to himself, and the others kept cold silence.

They were placed in the damp stone depths of the monastery dungeon, beneath the chanting halls, where the light of day could not reach. Bromrik stood at the gate of the chamber, arms crossed, tome at his side, watching as each prisoner was locked into their own cell.

Later, by the dull light of a lantern, he walked down the narrow corridor to the first chamber. Elesna Varn sat in chains, eyes hollow, her shawl tattered and fingers stained with old dye.

“Elesna,” Bromrik said, voice firm. “You are accused of consorting with the fiends of the underdark. Of evoking spirits in your weaving—runes not of our Lord Father’s blessing, but of profane origin. Do you confess?”

She looked up, slow and deliberate. “I wove what I saw in dreams. Patterns I do not understand. But I never called them. They came.”

“Dreams,” he muttered. “Darkness seeps first through dreams. If you wove them, you knew them. And if you knew them... they knew you.”

She said nothing.

Bromrik turned and walked to the next chamber. Old Herlim was already standing.

“Ah, Inquisitor,” he croaked. “Come to silence another truth-teller?”

Bromrik raised a brow. “Your books held forbidden rites. Scripts thought long dead, buried under the ashes of condemned scholars.”

Herlim chuckled. “History is not heresy. The truth has sharp edges—your Order fears to hold it.”

Bromrik’s fingers tightened on the tome. “Truth is flame, Herlim. And flame devours the unworthy.”

Behind him, Sir Mallien approached with a nod. “The farmer and his wife refuse to speak. The boy... he’s broken already. Keeps asking for his mother.”

“Good,” Bromrik said. “Let them sit with their guilt this night. In the morning, we begin the full inquiry.”

He turned back to Herlim.

“And tomorrow, old man, we’ll see which truths endure when the fire is lit.”

The door slammed shut, and the long echoes of the dungeon swallowed the silence.

The next morning, dawn struggled to pierce the thick-stoned walls of the monastery’s lower wing. In the interrogation chamber, Bromrik stood by a small brazier, warming his hands while flipping through the tome of law. The names glared up at him in ink—each a soul in question. Each a verdict waiting to be cast.

Elesna Varn was brought in second time. A weaver by trade, her hands were still stained with dye, trembling slightly as she was led to stand before the table.

Bromrik eyed her for a moment before speaking, then hit her in the face, blood spilling from her nose.

“You were seen beneath the old shrine ruins three nights past. Not by happenstance, but at the stroke of the witching hour. A woman of the Sacred Flame knows that place is sealed.”

Elesna swallowed, her voice barely more than a whisper. “I was gathering herbs… moonwort. My sister suffers fevers. I only needed—”

“You lit a lantern with blue fire,” Bromrik interrupted. “Not of oil, but of salt and blood. We know the signs, Elesna. You spoke words we traced in ash upon the stone."

She fell to her knees. “I only repeated what I heard from Old Herlim. He said they were protection chants! I didn’t know their meaning!”

“Then you spoke the tongue without knowing the serpent,” Bromrik muttered. “Ignorance does not pardon fire. It invites it.”

They took her back, quietly sobbing.

Next came Old Herlim again. The former historian shuffled slowly, hands bound, eyes sunken yet sharp. Once respected for his knowledge of ancient languages and ruins, now he stood accused of reviving dead speech.

“You taught the words of Dothiril,” Bromrik said. “The tongue of the sealed—used by those who summoned creatures in the Sable Era. Deny it, if you dare.”

“I taught history,” Herlim rasped. “Language is not allegiance. Words are not worship.”

“But you taught the boy Taln,” Bromrik said. “And what he spoke under moonlight, he learned from you. He called on something that rattled windows two valleys away.”

Herlim’s mouth went dry. “He… he asked questions. I answered. I never told him to speak aloud.”

“And yet he did,” Bromrik said and hit him in the stomach. “And the land heard.”

The old man’s shoulders sagged as he was taken away. Bromrik watched in silence, his mind already preparing for the next.

The farmer couple came next—Jerron and Mave. They stood together, holding hands despite their bonds. Bromrik flipped a page in his tome.

“You offered grain to a stone altar hidden in the hills, one we have since destroyed. You left oil and coin upon it. You spoke names not of the Sacred Flame.”

“It was a custom,” Jerron said. “Old ways of the land. Our forebears did it to keep the soil fertile. It’s tradition, not worship.”

Mave added, “We go to the church too, Father Inquisitor. Every sixth day. We pay our tithes.”

“You cannot serve two altars,” Bromrik said flatly. “And you poured honey for gods whose names do not belong to the Flame, heretics !.” A Sacred Flame knight took out hot pliers from the fire and stared pulling Jerrons nails out from his left hand. “You will burn for your crimes, pagan!” Jerron was screaming in pain. “I have done nothing wrong!!”

Jerron writhed on the cold, stone floor of the chamber, his screams echoing off the high, damp walls, a chilling symphony of agony that filled the air with dread. The flickering torchlight cast grotesque shadows that danced across his contorted face, illuminating the sweat and blood that mingled on his brow. Mave, bound to a nearby post, watched in horror, her heart racing as she struggled against her own restraints. The clinking of metal echoed ominously as the Sacred Flame knight prepared his instruments, each tool a relic of torment designed to extract confessions, to break wills, and to punish those deemed unworthy.

The pliers glinted menacingly in the firelight, the heat radiating from them a cruel reminder of the pain that awaited Jerron. With each agonizing tug, the knight’s resolve seemed unwavering, his face a mask of grim satisfaction. Jerron’s screams grew hoarse, reverberating through the chamber as the knight pulled again, the sound of tearing flesh mingling with the rasp of metal against bone. Each nail that was forcibly removed was a painful reminder of his defiance, a stark contrast to the love and warmth he had once known in the embrace of Mave.

“Please, stop!” Mave cried, her voice breaking as tears streamed down her cheeks. “He has done nothing wrong! We only wished to honor the land!” But her pleas fell on deaf ears, drowned out by the sound of Jerron’s torment. The knight turned, his eyes cold and devoid of empathy, as if Jerron’s suffering was merely a means to an end—an illustration of the power of the Sacred Flame.

Next, the knight produced a wooden paddle, its surface worn from years of use in the name of justice. The air thickened with tension as Jerron was forced to endure the relentless strikes, each blow echoing like a death knell. Mave’s heart shattered with each thud, a visceral reminder of their bond being weaponized against them. “You will confess,” the knight declared, his voice low and menacing. “You will renounce your old ways and embrace the truth.”

Jerron gasped for breath, his body wracked with pain, yet his spirit remained unbroken. “I am no traitor to my roots,” he choked out, defiance shining through the haze of agony. “The land has given us life. We owe it respect, not destruction.”

The knight’s face twisted in disdain. “Your foolishness will cost you dearly.” With that, he switched to a more sinister tool—a metal frame with sharp, serrated edges designed to inflict maximum torment. It was meant for those who dared to defy the Sacred Flame, a chilling reminder that the price of freedom could be steep.

As the knight approached, Mave’s heart raced. She could feel the weight of the moment bearing down on them. “Jerron, don’t—” she gasped, but the knight’s grip was unyielding.

They said no more. The hall fell silent as they were led away.

Finally came Taln.

The boy was silent as he stood, bruised and pale, eyes locked on the floor. Bromrik stepped around him, examining his posture, the way he clenched his jaw.

“You repeated the Chant of Hollow Echoes,” Bromrik said. “Only known from three burnt texts. You called wind from nowhere. Fire without tinder. Where did you learn this?”

Taln’s voice cracked. “It just came. Like a whisper. In my dreams. I didn’t know it was real…”

“Dreams are doors,” Bromrik muttered. “You opened one that should have remained sealed.”

The knights remained silent, bearing witness. No one else spoke. Bromrik closed the tome, breath held in a long sigh.

“In the name of the Sacred Flame, I declare this: each of you shall stand trial under full light tomorrow. What is judged then shall not be undone.”

He turned and left the chamber.

Behind him, the dungeon hummed with quiet sobs and the tightening of chains.

The damp air of the chamber hung heavy with the scent of sweat and fear, a grim atmosphere thickened by the echoes of suffering. Elesna Varn lay bound naked upon a splintered wooden rack, her body contorted in painful angles, the ropes digging into her skin. Across the room, Old Herlim, a weathered figure with deep lines etched into his face, was restrained in a similar manner. Despite their dire circumstances, their eyes locked in shared resolve—a flicker of defiance against the horrors that awaited them.

The Sacred Flame knights moved with methodical precision, their faces obscured by dark hoods, revealing only the glint of their intentions. It was clear they relished in the power they wielded, their laughter mingling with the sounds of clattering metal as they prepared their instruments of torment. Pliers, heated rods, and buckets of murky water were arrayed on the stone table like tools in a craftsman’s workshop.

The first knight approached Elesna, wielding a pair of pliers that glimmered ominously in the torchlight. “You think you can defy the Sacred Flame?” he taunted, an edge of mockery in his voice. With a swift motion, he clamped the pliers around her finger, squeezing until her scream pierced the air, a raw, primal sound that reverberated off the walls. As he twisted the tool, her flesh yielded to the pressure, agony surging through her entire being.

Old Herlim couldn’t bear to watch. “Stop! Please!” he shouted, his voice cracking with desperation. “We have done nothing to deserve this!” But his words only drew the attention of another knight, who approached him with a hot iron rod, glowing red and menacing.

“Silence, old man,” the knight spat, pressing the rod against Herlim’s forearm. Seering pain erupted as the metal met flesh, the smell of burning skin filling the air. Herlim gritted his

teeth, refusing to give in to the excruciating heat. “You will confess your sins,” the knight hissed, but all that escaped Herlim’s lips were a series of strained gasps and grunts, his spirit unyielding even in the face of such brutality.

As Elesna’s screams faded into ragged sobs, the knight released her finger, only to grab a bucket filled with murky water. “Let’s see how long you can hold your breath, witch,” he sneered, dragging her towards the bucket. She thrashed against her bonds, instinctively trying to escape, but it was futile. The knight plunged her head into the water, holding her down as panic surged through her veins. The world above became a distant memory, her lungs burning for air, the suffocating grip of water threatening to pull her into darkness.

Just as her vision began to blur, the knight pulled her back up, laughter erupting from his lips as she gasped for breath, water cascading down her face. “Confess!” he demanded, but Elesna could only splutter, “I will never—” before being plunged back into the depths again.

Meanwhile, the other knight continued to torment Old Herlim, delivering brutal blows to his already weary body. Each strike sent shockwaves of pain coursing through him, the relentless beating echoing like a drumbeat of despair. “Tell us where the heretics gather, or this will only get worse,” the knight growled, his fists unyielding against the frail body of the old man. But Herlim’s resolve remained steadfast, his spirit refusing to be extinguished even as blood trickled down his battered face.

Back to Elesna, the knight finally pulled her from the water, only to brandish the pliers once more, this time targeting her toes. “You think you can withstand this?” he mocked, squeezing the pliers with a grin. With a gut-wrenching scream, Elesna felt the metal bite into her flesh, the pain radiating through her entire body, but deep within her heart.

The monastery stones whispered with chill, the corridor echoing Bromrik’s heavy tread as he passed the cells one by one. Each door bore a carved rune of the Sacred Flame, burning faintly from the blessing cast upon them at sunrise. Behind each waited one of the accused—now separated, their bonds of story and comfort fraying in silence.

He began again with Elesna Varn. She stood rigid in the corner of her cell, a weaver’s pride still etched into the lines of her spine despite the plain grey robe now draped over her. Bromrik entered with his tome in one hand and a folded parchment in the other.

“You claimed,” he began, voice cool and precise, “that you met Old Herlim but rarely. Yet witnesses saw you enter his home five times this past season.”

She hesitated. “He asked for mending. He’s an old man.”

Bromrik laid the parchment on the table, showing a sketch of a sigil: a coiled vine crowned with three thorns. “And what is this doing carved into the underside of your loom bench?”

Her face went pale. “That… that’s nothing. Decoration. I copied it from old threadwork.”

“Copied it from Herlim’s study, you mean,” Bromrik replied, narrowing his eyes. “He kept the same symbol carved into his desk. You think the Sacred Flame blind, Elesna?”

She said nothing more.

He moved on to Old Herlim next. The old historian sat on his stool, thin hands resting over knees like a man preparing for his own burial. His eyes sparkled with defiance even in weariness.

“I recognize your mind’s sharpness,” Bromrik said. “But it sharpens lies just as easily as truths. Tell me, why does Taln, the healer’s apprentice, recite lines from your old volumes—lines describing the rites of the Deep Voice beneath the earth?”

Herlim’s lips curled. “The boy’s curious. Knowledge is not sin.”

“Knowledge wielded without faith is a torch in dry grass,” Bromrik shot back. “It devours. Tell me, was it you who showed him the Three-Tongued Chant?”

“I taught history. Not invocation.”

“You taught rebellion dressed in parchment.”

Bromrik’s next step led him to Taln. The boy sat curled on his cot, legs drawn to chest, eyes red-rimmed. He looked younger than his sixteen winters now, drained by fear.

“Taln,” Bromrik said, kneeling before him. “You’re the youngest, but if you speak truth, mercy might be given. Tell me who carved the mark on your belt pouch.”

“I—I don’t know who did. Maybe it was already there…”

“I don’t believe that,” Bromrik said. “Because Jerron bears the same on the haft of his hoe, and Mave on the underside of her kitchen shelf. You were not alone, Taln.”

The boy broke down into sobs, incoherent apologies tumbling from his lips.

Bromrik said no more. Each name, each story, each token pointed to a knot beneath the surface—something older, something whispered through generations in this place. The sigil linked them, the words stitched across their memories like a curse.

He stepped back into the hall and shut the cell door. Candlelight flickered behind him as he returned to his chamber, breathing heavily. Tomorrow, he would confront Jerron and Mave.

Morning rain misted the cobblestones as Bromrik made his way through the side lane toward the humble cottage that served as Barnhill’s healer’s hut. Smoke rose lazily from a chimney, and a line of drying herbs hung beneath the awning, dancing gently in the damp breeze. The door creaked open at his knock, revealing Maerin, the town’s healer—grey-haired, sharp-eyed, and worn by years of tending births, breaks, and fevers.

“Inquisitor,” she said with a cautious nod, stepping aside. “Come in from the chill.”

Bromrik ducked through the doorway, casting his gaze over the orderly rows of jars and bundles, the lingering scent of rosemary and bitterroot filling the space.

“I come for answers, healer,” he said, voice low. “About Taln.”

Maerin’s face tightened.

“You were his mentor,” Bromrik continued. “You taught him your craft. I need to know—was there anything... strange in his behavior? Any signs he spoke to unseen things, heard what others could not?”

She hesitated. “He was a quiet boy, thoughtful. Spent time in the woods when he could. Picked herbs by moonlight sometimes. I told him not to—said it was bad luck.”

“Did he speak in tongues?” Bromrik asked.

“No,” Maerin said slowly. “But once... I heard him whisper to a stone he kept. Polished, dark green, like a river rock. He said it helped him dream.”

“And did you take it from him?”

“I did.” She walked to a high shelf and returned with a small cloth bundle, unwrapping it. Inside was the stone. Bromrik took it in hand and narrowed his eyes. The surface was etched faintly with a spiral—another variant of the same symbol.

He pocketed it and turned. “You may have taught him healing, Maerin, but others taught him to listen to the wrong voices.”

Maerin said nothing as he left.

Meanwhile, inside the monastery, an old voice trembled softly in the prayer alcove. Elder Cadrin, a stooped man with hands twisted from years of farming, knelt beside Brother Varek and whispered.

“They’re good folk, Jerron and Mave,” he pleaded. “We have stories, aye, passed from our grandsires. The three thorns and the vine—that’s an old mark of harvest. It’s nothing dark. Just tradition. We didn’t know it would mean death.”

Brother Varek placed a hand on Cadrin’s shoulder. “Your words will be weighed, elder. But the Inquisitor moves by doctrine, not sentiment.”

From the corridor, Bromrik had paused in shadow. He heard it all. The words settled like stones in his chest. He turned, footsteps heavy on the stone floor, and returned to his chamber, the green stone in his hand suddenly feeling heavier than before.

Tradition. Belief. Heresy. Where did one end and the next begin?

He sat in silence as night approached, staring into the flickering candle, the echoes of pleas, screams and portents dancing in the flame.

The hall of reflection in Barnhill’s monastery was a long chamber of grey stone and amber light, where flickering lanterns hung low over aged wooden beams. Rain still whispered

against the roof as Bromrik stood before the altar, fingers resting on his tome. Behind him, steps echoed—measured, deliberate.

Brother Alric emerged from the far side of the hall, his robes trimmed in ash-white, his face marked with age, not fear.

“You seek fire in every shadow, Bromrik,” the old monk said quietly. “But not every shadow hides flame.”

Bromrik turned slowly. “I’ve heard enough pleas for mercy dressed as innocence. We are tasked with burning out the rot before it spreads.”

Alric stopped at the second row of benches and folded his hands before him.

“Justice without understanding is merely vengeance cloaked in righteousness.”

Bromrik’s jaw tensed. “We don’t reason with heresy. The Path of the Sacred Flame says: ‘Mercy is offered once. Twice is pride. A third time is betrayal.’”

“And what of the passage from the Ninth Ember Scroll?” Alric asked, voice calm. “‘Let the shepherd know his flock. Let him learn their cries before he lifts the rod.’”

“Those who kill priests and scratch the mark of demon things into their homes are no flock,” Bromrik snapped. “They are wolves, and wolves must be hunted.”

“Even wolves have origin, Bromrik. Fear, ignorance, desperation. You see only the wound. Do you never ask who bled first?”

Silence stretched between them like a drawn blade. Bromrik looked past the monk, to the rain-wet glass and the grey beyond.

“I have asked,” he muttered, more to himself. “And the answer has always returned: the world sins by breathing. We are given no time to soothe it. Only to cauterize the wound.”

Alric approached, standing beside the dwarf. “You carry the weight of justice, yes. But justice is not always steel. It is also stillness. Doubt is not weakness. It is awareness.”

Bromrik’s fingers gripped the tome. “Then let me be blind with fire if I must. Stillness does not drive heresy from a land. Flame does.”

The monk sighed and bowed his head. “Then may the Lord Father show us both the cost in time.”

Bromrik stood long after Alric left, staring at the altar. Rain pounded harder now. He felt it behind his eyes—a storm not of water, but will. The path he walked was clear. And it was lit by fire.

The chamber had transformed into a nightmarish arena, where the Sacred Flame knights enacted their grim justice with an unwavering conviction. The air was thick with the stench of sweat and fear, mingling with the flickering torchlight that illuminated the faces of Elesna

Varn, Old Herlim, Jerron, and Mave. Bound to a series of wooden racks, their bodies were subjected to unimaginable torment, each moment stretching the limits of their endurance.

Elesna, the once-proud weaver whose hands had crafted beauty from threads of color, now lay helplessly on a crude wooden rack. Her legs were spread wide, her ankles shackled to the frame with heavy chains that glinted ominously in the dim light. Weights dangled from her limbs, each a brutal reminder of her defiance against the Sacred Flame's doctrine. The crushing pressure bore down upon her, a physical manifestation of the knights' belief in their righteous cause. With every passing moment, the weights felt heavier, her muscles screaming in protest as she fought against the pain.

Across the room, Old Herlim was strapped to a wooden plank, a cruel mechanism fixed to both ends. The knights reveled in their wickedness, pulling the ropes taut and stretching his body to its limits. His spine felt as though it might splinter under the strain, the sensation of being pulled nearly in half sending waves of agony coursing through him. "You are nothing but a relic of a forgotten age!" one knight shouted, his voice dripping with contempt. "Your false histories will be erased, just like the lies you've spun about the Sacred Flame!"

Jerron and Mave, bound together in their shared suffering, were subjected to the relentless torture of leg screws. The mechanism twisted with a horrible grinding sound, pinching their legs together mercilessly. Mave gritted her teeth, tears streaming down her face as she tried to endure the pain. "Hold on, love," Jerron whispered, his voice strained but steady. "We'll get through this together." But the tightening screws bore down with cruel intensity, making it increasingly difficult to remain composed.

"Look at these false believers!" one knight bellowed, pacing between the racks like a predator surveying its prey. "Descendants of demons, reveling in their pagan cult! You will burn in hell for your sins!" Each word was punctuated by the anguished cries of the captives, echoing through the stone walls as the knights reveled in their sense of righteousness.

Elesna's mind raced, fighting against the encroaching despair. She thought of the vibrant tapestries she had woven, the stories they told of her people, and the connection they shared with the land.

Another knight tightened the screws further, eliciting a fresh wave of screams from Jerron and Mave. "You will confess your heresies, or the pain will only grow worse!"

Time seemed to lose all meaning as the knights continued their merciless campaign, relishing every moment of suffering they inflicted. The wooden racks creaked under the weight of the captives' bodies, a haunting reminder of their resilience against the tide of darkness that sought to drown them.

Elesna's resolve began to crumble as the torture intensified. Her breath came in ragged gasps, and her body trembled with exhaustion and pain. "Please," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "I cannot... I cannot bear this any longer."

The knight looming over her sneered, a cruel smile playing on his lips. "Ah, so the great weaver of lies is ready to sing a different tune? Let us hear your confession, heretic!"

Elesna's eyes welled up with tears, and she nodded weakly. "Yes... yes, I confess. I have lied. Our beliefs... they are false."

A sense of triumph flashed across the knight's face. "Louder, so that all may hear your blasphemy!"

Elesna took a deep, shuddering breath and shouted, "I confess! Our beliefs are lies!

Old Herlim, his body stretched to the breaking point, could only muster a hoarse cry. "No... Elesna, do not give in!"

But the damage was done. The knights turned their attention to Jerron and Mave, who were equally broken. Jerron's voice cracked as he begged, "Stop... please, stop the screws. I cannot take anymore."

Mave, her face a mask of pain and terror, nodded in agreement. "We confess! Everything we believe is a lie! Please, make it stop!"

Elesna's heart ached as she heard her companions' confessions. She had failed them, failed their people, and failed the truths they held dear. The room spun around her, and she felt a deep, abiding shame wash over her. The knights, satisfied with their victory, began to loosen the mechanisms, allowing the broken bodies of their captives to slump in relief.

"You have learned your lesson well, heretics," one knight said, his voice cold and final. "May you rot in the knowledge of your own deceit."

As the pain subsided, Elesna could only weep, her tears a river of regret and despair. The vibrant tapestries of her mind, the stories of her people, now seemed like nothing more than faded dreams, torn and ruined by their captors.

The hall was quiet as each of the accused stood in turn, their faces weary beneath the weight of long hours, hard questions, and sleepless nights in the monastery’s hold. Bromrik stood near the stone dais where the panel of monks watched from elevated seats. A hush had fallen over the gathered townsfolk who had come not to jeer, but to witness judgment.

Elesna Varn was called first. Her hands trembled slightly, still bearing traces of the thread she once worked as a weaver. She stepped forward, chin lifted with some remaining dignity. “I tended the old tales,” she said quietly, voice clear. “The songs of the moon and the green spirits. We never called them gods, never called them demons. They were old things, like the wind. If that is heresy, then I am guilty. But I never harmed a soul.”

Old Herlim came next, led by a younger monk’s hand. He leaned on a cane, age thick in his bones. “The symbols—they fascinated me. I wrote of them, yes. I believed they were remnants of the past. Forgotten truths. But I was a scholar, not a summoner. If knowledge itself is now sin, then there is no hope for wisdom.”

Then came Jerron and Mave. The farmer couple stood close, fingers just brushing as if to draw strength. Jerron spoke first, his voice cracked by pain. “We prayed in our own way. In the fields, to the land. We never denied the Sacred Flame. We only didn’t understand its language.” Mave added, “We taught our children to be kind, to be grateful. That’s what the old chants meant to us—gratitude, not rebellion.”

Finally, Taln. The boy's eyes were hollow from nights of waking dreams and fearful prayers. When he stepped forward, the wind seemed to sigh. “I heard things,” he admitted. “Voices, dreams. They told me strange things, and I was afraid. I tried not to listen. I told Elesna, and she gave me charms for protection. I never meant for any harm. I don’t want to be... whatever it is you say I am.”

The murmurs that followed were not loud. Some villagers wept. Others exchanged glances filled with unease or judgment. Bromrik said nothing yet. The Sacred Flame’s justice was patient—but it came.

Morning hung gray over Barnhill, the sky low and pressed with clouds as though the heavens themselves were holding breath. The courtyard outside the monastery filled slowly—no jeering crowds today, only quiet faces, weathered hands clutching shawls and hats, eyes shaded with grief or fear.

Bromrik stood beneath the great oak where a gallows had been assembled. His axe remained sheathed. Today, he would only watch. Not all justice required the same blade.

Taln knelt before the monks in the inner chapel. His sentence had been passed the night before—he would not die. Instead, he would serve. Ten years of penance under sacred watch, working the gardens and kitchens, rising in prayer before dawn, and learning the words of the Tome. Some had murmured in disapproval. But Bromrik had spoken for the boy.

“Madness is not malice,” he had said. “If there’s flame left to kindle, let it be kindled under watchful hands.”

Old Herlim had not been so spared. His fate was quieter: life within the monastery walls, restricted to the scriptorium and silent prayer. He had spoken his thanks with a bowed head and accepted the monk’s robe when it was placed over his shoulders.

But for the others—Elesna, Jerron, and Mave—the gallows awaited.

The monks read the verdicts in solemn tones, each crime named, each word wrapped in scripture. Elesna kept her head high to the end, lips moving in some forgotten tongue. Jerron and Mave held hands until the rope separated them.

Bromrik did not flinch. He watched each rise, then fall, and gave the sign of the Sacred Flame after each drop. Justice had been served.

Later, when the sky broke and a thin rain began to fall, Bromrik walked alone through Barnhill’s muddy lanes. The townsfolk had gone indoors. Smoke rose from chimneys. Life would go on.

His boots scraped the cobbles as he lit his pipe and pulled his cloak tighter against the wind. He looked up at the slate sky, listening to the hush of rain on rooftops.

“I carry the flame,” he muttered to himself, voice half-lost in the wind. “Not to warm, but to burn. Not to comfort, but to cleanse.”

He reached into his cloak and drew out the next scroll.

Five more names. Another village. Another path.

Without another word, he turned toward his cart. The journey would not end. Not until the last sin was judged and the last shadow burned away.

Eldwythe

Bromrik’s cart rolled through the frost-kissed valley of Eldwythe, a somber landscape of pale birches and still grey streams. Distant hills rose like the backs of slumbering giants, and above them loomed the dark spires of Vellgrath Manor. Once hailed as a stronghold of devotion, it now stood cloaked in silence, its windows blank as tombstones. Bromrik clutched his tome, his eyes narrowed. He had received the writ three months ago, sealed by Bishop Tyrell himself: suspicion of heresy within the noble House of Vellgrath, tied to the young heir, Lord Auren.

A storm was swelling in the west, clouds pressing down like the hand of judgment as Bromrik reached the estate gate. Two guards in blackened plate allowed him passage without question—his name had preceded him.

Inside, the manor was all high arches and shadowed corridors, tapestries woven with the deeds of old kings and martyrs of flame. Yet something hung in the air, like the smell of wax too long burned.

A steward met him at the threshold, a slim man with hollow cheeks. “Inquisitor Bromrik. Lord Auren awaits in the western hall.”

Bromrik’s boots echoed through the empty gallery. He passed portraits of saints and barons, yet beneath the brushstrokes of reverence, he thought he saw smirks… or were they smudges, warped by candle smoke?

In the hall, Lord Auren stood in partial silhouette, back to a tall stained-glass window depicting the Trial of Saint Themodan. He was barely twenty winters—clad in muted silver and fur, his hands clasped behind his back, as if bracing for a blow.

“Inquisitor,” Auren greeted, voice smooth as riverstone. “To what do I owe this sanctified visit?”

Bromrik grunted. “You know why I’m here, boy. I come by writ of the High Canon. Heresy whispered beneath your roof, and shadows lengthen in the name of Vellgrath.”

Auren turned. His eyes were a deep grey, intelligent, weary. “Whispers. That is all they ever are in this place. Old houses breed old grudges, Inquisitor.”

Bromrik stepped forward, his tone like iron striking flint. “Your uncle vanished during Embermonth. A hidden chapel was found beneath the servants’ quarters. Runes no priest would carve. What say you of that?”

“I say the past is not always clean,” Auren replied, cool but not insolent. “But I have burned no incense to gods unknown.”

Bromrik opened the tome and read aloud, “Let no man say ‘I did not kindle the fire,’ while his hearth smokes with forbidden ash.” He closed the book with finality. “I will stay three days. I will speak to your servants, your kin. I will find the truth of what lies buried here.”

Lord Auren inclined his head, his voice barely above a whisper. “Then may the Flame show you only truth, Inquisitor.”

But as Bromrik was led to his guest chamber, he could not shake the feeling that the manor itself watched him—that something beneath the stone had begun to stir.

The guest chamber was lined with old oak panels, the bed carved with flame motifs—a gesture to reverence, or perhaps mockery. Bromrik sat on the edge, his axe within reach, and gazed at the flickering hearth. The logs hissed with sap, but the warmth did little to comfort him. Somewhere beneath the floorboards, he imagined the roots of Vellgrath’s heresy coiled like worms through the foundation.

He began his inquiries at dawn.

The first to speak was Serilda, the housekeeper. A woman of near sixty winters with arms thick as kneaded bread and a mouth that twitched when nervous. Bromrik questioned her beneath the laundry arch.

“Have you seen anything strange of late?” he asked, voice low and cutting.

Serilda hesitated. “No, my lord. Only… only that Lord Auren walks alone at night. To the chapel ruins in the garden.”

“Alone?”

“Yes, but sometimes, the dogs will not go near the chapel after. They whine and claw the door.”

He logged this silently. At midday, he questioned a stablehand, Jorvan, who was bruised from an accident with a stallion—one he blamed on ‘a black shadow’ that had spooked the beast.

“It moved like smoke, but fast,” Jorvan said. “Like something crawling the rafters.”

“Your breath reeks of cider,” Bromrik muttered, but noted it anyway.

By late afternoon, he questioned the steward in a cold study chamber. The man was guarded, but the Inquisitor was skilled in needling gaps.

“Lord Auren’s uncle—he vanished in Embermonth. Where last was he seen?”

“In the western crypt,” the steward said. “He took wine to pray beneath the stone for his soul’s afflictions. But the door was sealed when we found it. No body.”

“No remains?”

“Only a sigil carved into the altar. Not of the Sacred Flame. A circle with thorns.”

Bromrik stiffened. He had seen it once before—in Duskvale, drawn in ash around a child’s cradle where none survived.

That night, Bromrik explored the manor grounds. The chapel ruins, as Serilda said, were choked in ivy, the door shattered inward long ago. Inside, the stone altar was cracked, and a black smear of wax lingered on its surface.

Behind the altar, half-buried, he found bones—small ones. Birds, perhaps. But some had been scored with markings: a triangle inside a circle, thorned again.

He whispered a prayer.

“Blessed Lord Father, cast flame into the hollows, where darkness clings.”

The wind carried a sound then—a chant, low and inharmonic, from beneath the earth.

Bromrik stepped back, drawing his axe. “So. The bones of Vellgrath do sing.”

Tomorrow, he would question Lord Auren again. But tonight, he watched the windows of the manor flicker, and wondered what eyes watched back.

The morning broke cold, a sharp contrast to the summer warmth of the day before. Fog slithered low along the fields, curling around statues in the Vellgrath garden like ghostly serpents. Bromrik stepped across the dewed grass with heavy purpose, his cloak trailing slightly behind, the steel clasp of his mantle shaped like the twin tongues of the Sacred Flame.

Lord Auren was in the solar, studying a leather-bound tome with corners gilded in green. When Bromrik entered without knocking, Auren did not flinch.

“Reading anything faithful?” Bromrik asked, eyeing the foreign binding.

“It is a treatise on trade routes through the Black Mire,” Auren replied evenly. “Not all of us feast on fire and gospel at dawn.”

Bromrik approached the desk. “Your uncle vanished. Your house chapel is desecrated. A circle of thorns marks your altar, and I find bones scrawled with runes. Now you will tell me the truth.”

Auren shut the book gently, and in the silence, his mask began to crack. “What truth would you have, Inquisitor? That the Vellgraths were once dragon-bound? That our blood calls to the deep? That my great-grandfather burned down six temples because his dreams told him to?”

“I would hear *your* truth,” Bromrik pressed, his knuckles resting on the wood. “Your house was clean, your ancestors loyal. This—this thing crawling through your chapel—is a rot. Are you the root, or the fruit of it?”

Auren rose, slowly. “I have heard it call. I won’t lie. A voice beneath the ruins. It speaks in syllables that taste like honey and iron. It promises strength, freedom, fire of a different kind.”

“So you worship it?”

“I fear it.”

Bromrik leaned close, his breath touched with pipe smoke and holy oaths. “The Sacred Flame tests men. Some are iron, some are ash. You may still be shaped. But the heresy ends now.”

Suddenly, Auren slammed his fist on the table, sending the book flying. “You *don’t* understand, dwarf! It’s not faith we defy—it’s fate! My father heard the same voice, and he hung himself to silence it. My uncle went below and never returned. I fight it every day!”

Bromrik remained still for a moment. Then: “Then show me.”

Auren blinked. “What?”

“Take me to the place. Where it speaks.”

Auren hesitated only a moment before nodding. He crossed the solar, moved a tapestry, and pressed a concealed stone in the wall. With a low grind, the floor panel near the hearth slid open.

Bromrik stared into the mouth of a spiral stair carved in obsidian-black rock. The air that rose from it smelled not of mold, but of spice and old ink.

“You go first,” Bromrik said.

And together, they descended into the deep places of the Vellgrath estate—toward the truth buried beneath noble stone and centuries of silence.

The descent into the earth was silent but for their footsteps echoing against slick stone. The passage narrowed at intervals, the air thickening with each step, scented faintly of sweet rot and something older—dust not of decay, but of ancient parchment and long-dried blood.

Their torch sputtered in the stagnant air. Bromrik held it high, his axe in the other hand, each breath shallow as they went deeper beneath House Vellgrath.

The stair ended at a wide, natural cavern, its walls black as soot and lined with faint, veined threads of greenish crystal that pulsed softly like a resting heart. In the center of the chamber stood an altar—one of polished obsidian ringed by seven slender statues, each hooded, eyeless, and robed in stone. Blood trails crusted the floor near the base. Behind the altar yawned a fissure in the rock, wide enough for a man to crawl into, breathing out a low, rhythmic moan as if the mountain itself exhaled despair.

“This is where it speaks to me,” Auren whispered. “Always from the rift. It calls itself Orheran—the Hollow Flame.”

Bromrik stepped forward slowly. “There is only one Flame, and it is not hollow. This… thing is a pretender.”

A low murmur pulsed from the fissure, rising in pitch. Bromrik’s torch dimmed as if threatened by some invisible wind.

“I tried sealing it,” Auren murmured. “Bricking the passage, binding it with the names of saints. Nothing holds. It always returns. I even—” he stopped, his voice catching.

“What did you do?”

Auren closed his eyes. “I sacrificed the house hound. Three nights ago. I thought blood might appease it.”

“You offered a beast?” Bromrik snarled. “The next will be your kin if this folly continues!”

“I don’t *want* this!” Auren cried out. “I was born to a curse I never chose! If the Order knew what lurked under this house, they would burn us all.”

Bromrik’s voice was low and sharp. “They *will* know. And if they burn, it will be just. The Sacred Flame does not pardon through silence.”

Then the fissure screamed.

Not a sound of a mouth, but of pressure breaking in the mind—images of flame burning backwards, of skeletal trees hung with tongues, of a city drowning in black milk. Auren collapsed to his knees. Bromrik dropped his torch, clutching his skull for a heartbeat that seemed to stretch to eternity.

And then it stopped. Only the flickering light remained, now low and dying.

“Do you see?” Auren gasped. “I am not mad. This is no dream.”

Bromrik stood slowly. His face was pale, but his eyes hard as iron. “You are not mad. But madness walks with you. And now we cleanse this place.”

He raised his tome and began to chant—a consecration from the Seventh Ember, an exorcism of caves.

Behind him, the black flame flickered in the fissure, and the statues trembled. Not with motion, but with resonance—as if the very stone recoiled from the holy words. Bromrik's voice echoed deeper with each phrase, his tongue speaking in the old tongue of flame-born rites, words rarely uttered outside cathedral vaults.

Auren staggered back, shielding his face. The green-veined walls pulsed erratically. From within the fissure came a sound like the crackling of bones being ground to ash, followed by a deep, slithering hiss.

One of the robed statues cracked at the base. Another followed, splitting down its hooded face with a sound like ice fracturing underfoot. The moaning breath from the fissure turned shrill, shrieking in an alien pitch that bent the flame of Bromrik's torch sideways.

But the Inquisitor did not yield. "By the Light that razed the Hollow Spire, by the Breath of Ember upon the unclean tongue, I command this filth—depart!"

The fissure screamed.

Black fire licked out in spirals, catching nothing, yet scorching the very air. Auren fell to the ground, clutching his ears and sobbing. The altar cracked clean down the center with a shudder, and the crystal veins in the cavern walls dimmed like dying stars.

Then silence fell.

Thick. Utter. As if the world had stopped breathing.

Bromrik lowered the tome, his hands shaking, sweat streaming down his cheeks. "It's done."

Auren didn't answer, curled on the floor in a fetal coil.

The fissure remained, but now it was inert—no sound, no flicker. Only the dead weight of something buried, now sealed by invocation and flame.

Bromrik turned, eyes lingering on the broken altar.

"This house will be purged. Brick by brick if needed. And you, Auren Vellgrath, must face judgment. Even if born into sin, you must choose what to serve. The Lord Father grants mercy to the penitent—but never to the coward."

"I will testify," Auren whispered hoarsely. "Everything. Even my shame."

Bromrik nodded once, solemn. Then took Auren by the arm, guiding him back up the long stair—into the failing daylight and the cold wind.

The yard of Vellgrath Manor lay under a sky bruised with storm clouds, the air heavy with the scent of frost and impending rain. A rough-hewn wooden block, scarred from decades of lesser judgments, stood at the center of the barren expanse, surrounded by churned mud and

the brittle husks of dead grass. The manor's broken spires loomed behind, their shadows stretching like accusing fingers. A sparse crowd of servants and villagers huddled at the edge, their faces pale, their breaths misting in the cold. They stood in silence, bound by fear and the weight of the Sacred Flame's justice.

Inquisitor Bromrik stood before the block, his crimson cloak stiff with dried blood from the cavern's ordeal, the tome of the Sacred Flame gripped tightly in one hand. His battle axe, its blade etched with runes of purification, rested against the block, its edge glinting dully in the fading light. Auren Vellgrath knelt before it, his hands bound with iron chains that clinked softly with each tremor of his body. His silver-furred tunic was tattered, stained with sweat and the black ash of the fissure's wrath. His grey eyes, once sharp with defiance, now held a quiet resignation, fixed on the block's pitted surface.

Bromrik opened the tome, its pages whispering like a dying breath. His voice, steady as stone, carried over the yard. "Auren Vellgrath, you stand condemned for the sin of conjuring a demon, calling forth the Hollow Flame known as Orheran. The law of the Sacred Flame is unyielding." He read from the vellum, each word a hammer's strike: "'He who opens the gate to the abyss, who speaks the tongue of the unclean, shall be severed from the Light. His head shall fall, his soul cast to the Lord Father's judgment, that the earth may be cleansed.'"

Auren's voice, raw from screaming in the cavern, rasped softly. "I did not seek to serve it, Inquisitor. I fought its call. But my blood… it was born to this curse."

Bromrik's gaze was cold, but not without pity. "The blood of Vellgrath is no excuse. You offered sacrifice. You heard its voice and did not silence it with faith. The Flame demands reckoning." He closed the tome with a snap, the sound echoing like a door sealing shut. "Speak your final words, Auren."

Auren lifted his head, his eyes meeting Bromrik's. "I beg forgiveness… not for me, but for this house. Burn it, Inquisitor. Let no stone stand. Let no other bear what I have." A tear traced his cheek, freezing halfway. "And may the Lord Father judge me gently."

Bromrik nodded, his face unyielding but his voice softer. "The Flame will judge. I am but its hand." He gestured to the block. "Place your neck upon the wood."

Auren shuffled forward, his chains dragging in the mud. He lowered his head to the block, the rough grain biting into his throat, splinters pricking his skin. His breath came in short, shuddering bursts, misting in the chill air. The crowd held its breath, some clutching rosaries of the Sacred Flame, others turning away. Bromrik gripped the axe, its haft worn smooth by years of service, and stepped to Auren's side. He planted his boots firmly, the mud sucking at his soles, and raised the blade high. The runes along its edge seemed to glow faintly, as if the Flame itself approved.

"Lord Father, purify this soul in fire eternal," Bromrik intoned, his voice carrying the weight of ritual. "Let the unclean be cast out."

Auren whispered, barely audible, "I am ready."

The axe fell.

The blade sang through the air, a swift arc that ended in a wet, crunching thud. Blood erupted in a crimson spray, painting the block and spattering Bromrik's cloak, the droplets steaming in the cold. Auren's head parted cleanly, rolling into the mud with a dull thump, his eyes frozen wide, mouth agape as if still forming a prayer. His body slumped forward, twitching briefly before collapsing, blood pooling in a dark halo around the block.

Bromrik lowered the axe, its edge slick with gore, and exhaled a slow, heavy breath. The crowd gasped, a low moan rippling through them, some weeping, others crossing themselves. He wiped the blade on his cloak, leaving a scarlet smear, and turned to the manor. "This house is accursed," he declared to the villagers. "By dawn, it will burn. Take what is yours and flee."

He stepped over Auren's body, leaving it for the servants to bury, and strode toward the manor's gate. The wind howled, carrying the iron tang of blood and the faint, lingering spice of the cavern's air. As he passed the threshold, a single glance back revealed the manor's windows, dark and empty, as if the house itself mourned its last lord. Bromrik whispered a prayer under his breath: "Lord Father, let this be the end of Vellgrath's shadow."

The storm broke as he departed, rain falling like tears to wash the blood from the earth.

The Ashes of Truth

The road to Hellens city stretched like a scar across the frost-bitten highlands, its cobbles cracked by time and the weight of pilgrims' feet. Bromrik Stonemantle sat hunched in his weathered wagon, the reins slack in his calloused hands as Krosh, his grey mule, trudged forward with a stubborn gait. The dwarf's black beard was dusted with pipe ash, the sweet smoke curling into the slate-grey dawn. His iron-bound tome of law rested beside him, its leather cover worn smooth by years of judgment, a silent companion to his thoughts. The air was sharp with the scent of pine and damp earth, the wind whispering questions that Bromrik could no longer ignore.

Hellens loomed ahead, its spires piercing the mist like the bones of a fallen god. The city was the heart of the Path of the Sacred Flame, where the Cathedral of the Lord-Father stood atop Cathedral Hill, its golden dome a beacon of divine will. Bromrik had no summons, no scroll of names to hunt. This journey was his own, driven by a hunger to know the roots of the faith he served. The Sacred Flame's laws were iron, its justice fire, but what had forged it? Was it born to battle true evil, or to bind men's hearts in chains of control? The question gnawed at him, a splinter in his soul.

The city gates rose before him, flanked by stone saints whose eyes seemed to judge his approach. Guards in crimson tabards bearing the flame sigil stepped aside, their gazes averted. Bromrik urged Krosh through the crowded streets, past merchants hawking relics

and monks chanting low. Cathedral Hill beckoned, its steps a path to answers—or to truths that might burn.

Bromrik climbed the polished steps of Cathedral Hill, his boots thudding with the steady rhythm of a man whose faith was forged in iron. The braziers flanking the path burned fierce, their flames casting long shadows across the stone, a testament to the Lord-Father's eternal vigilance. His axe hung heavy at his belt, the tome of law tucked under his arm, its weight a comfort, like the hammer of justice itself. Hellens sprawled below, a maze of cobbled alleys and incense-choked air, but Bromrik's eyes were fixed on the cathedral's golden dome, gleaming through the morning mist. He sought the library within, where ancient tomes held the Sacred Flame's beginnings— a desire to know the fire's first spark.

The cathedral's iron doors loomed, carved with scenes of martyrs consumed in holy flame. Bromrik pushed them open, the groan of hinges echoing through the nave. The air was thick with myrrh and wax, the vaulted ceiling lost in shadow. Monks in coal-black robes chanted softly, their voices a low pulse against the stone. At the altar, the Lord-Father's statue stood, its iron arms outstretched, a brazier blazing at its feet. Bromrik paused, offering a curt prayer: "Lord-Father, guide my eyes to Your truth."

Behind a tapestry of Saint Themodan's trial, a blackened oak door led to the library. The guarding monk, a wizened figure with parchment-thin skin, nodded at Bromrik's sigil of the Inquisition. "The tomes await, Inquisitor," he rasped. Bromrik stepped through, the scent of old leather and dust enveloping him. Shelves towered into the gloom, heavy with scrolls and books, their secrets locked behind iron grilles. He would start here, with the oldest texts, to trace the Flame's birth.

The Cathedral Hill library was a crypt of silent wisdom, its shelves stretching into shadow, laden with tomes that whispered of ages past. Bromrik stood at the chamber's heart, the lantern's flame casting jagged light across his bearded face. The air was heavy with the scent of ancient ink and leather, a weight that felt holy, as if the Lord-Father Himself had sealed these truths. His fingers, rough from wielding axe and scripture, traced the iron grilles guarding the oldest texts. He sought the Sacred Flame's genesis—to stand closer to its divine fire.

A narrow alcove at the library's rear held a gate of twisted iron, its bars shaped like licking flames. The monk had spoken of a forbidden vault below, where the Church kept its earliest annals, sealed since the dawn of the faith. Bromrik's sigil of the Inquisition granted access; the monk handed him a blackened key etched with a rune of binding. "Read with care, Inquisitor," the old man warned, his voice dry as ash. Bromrik grunted, undeterred. His faith was a fortress, and knowledge would only strengthen its walls.

The gate groaned open, revealing a stair carved into the bedrock, descending into darkness. Bromrik lit his lantern, its glow barely piercing the cold air that rose from below, thick with the scent of sealed stone and forgotten parchment. Each step echoed, a solemn rhythm matching the beat of his iron heart. At the stair's end, a vaulted chamber opened, its walls lined with shelves of tomes and scrolls, their covers bound in leather and iron. A stone table

stood at the center, scarred with burn marks, as if the truths here had once fought to be free. Bromrik set his lantern down and began his search, the Flame's justice guiding his hand.

The forbidden vault beneath Cathedral Hill was a tomb of secrets, its air thick with the weight of centuries, as if the stone itself guarded the truths within. Bromrik Stonemantle stood before the shelves, his lantern's flame flickering against the blackened wood, casting shadows that danced like silent prayers. The tomes and scrolls were bound in leather, iron, and stranger materials—some shimmered faintly, others bore faint scorch marks, as if they had resisted the fire of judgment. His axe rested against the stone table, its runes gleaming faintly, while his tome of law lay open beside it, a steadfast anchor to the Lord-Father's will. Bromrik's faith was a furnace, unyielding and pure, and this quest was a pilgrimage to trace the Sacred Flame's first ember.

He scanned the shelves, his calloused fingers pausing on a tome bound in soot-dark leather, its cover embossed with a sigil of a flame encircled by thorns. The title, etched in angular script, read: Annals of the First Ember. Bromrik pulled it free, the binding creaking like a breaking bone, and set it on the table. Its pages were brittle, stained with ash and faint traces of wax, as if wept over by candles long extinguished. The text was in the old tongue of the Sacred Flame, its letters sharp as blades. Bromrik read aloud, his voice a low rumble in the vault's silence, each word a step into the faith's dawn.

"In the Year of the Shattered Dawn, when the earth groaned and the skies bled ash, the Lord-Father descended as a pillar of fire upon the Mount of Ashes. He chose seven mortals, the Embers, to forge His Path, for the world was plagued by the Hollowed—spirits born of the deep earth, whose whispers wove lies into men's souls. The Hollowed were not mere shadows, but fragments of a shattered flame, older than the gods, promising power to those who knelt."

Bromrik's eyes narrowed. The Hollowed—entities of ancient malice, yet tied to a flame. His faith held firm, but the words stirred his curiosity, a spark seeking fuel. He turned the page, the parchment crackling under his touch. "The Embers, led by Vyran the Unbroken, burned the Hollowed's altars, their fires cleansing the land. But some among the faithful faltered, drawn to the Hollowed's call. These priests, naming themselves the Order of the Hollow Flame, claimed the Lord-Father's light was but half of a greater fire—one that burned both purity and ruin. Their sigils were thorns and vines, their chants a blasphemy of unity."

A schism, Bromrik thought, his pipe clenched unlit between his teeth. The Sacred Flame's earliest days were not unblemished, but scarred by betrayal. He read on, the text detailing Vyran's crusade. "The First Ember War raged, village by village, as Vyran's loyalists clashed with the Hollow Flame's priests. The heretics summoned winds that wailed and fires that devoured stone, but Vyran's faith was a hammer, striking down their altars. The Lord-Father's justice prevailed, the Hollowed's voices sealed in the deep places, their priests scourged and their names burned from memory."

Bromrik paused, his lantern's flame steady as his heart. The Sacred Flame was born in battle, a righteous war against a true evil. Yet the Hollow Flame's claim—that the Lord-Father's fire

was incomplete—lingered like smoke, a question he would pursue further in the vault's shadowed depths.

The vault's shadows clung to the stone walls like a second skin, the lantern's flame a lone sentinel against the oppressive dark. Bromrik Stonemantle stood at the scarred table, the Annals of the First Ember open before him, its pages brittle as autumn leaves. The air was thick with the scent of ancient parchment and iron, a holy weight that pressed against his chest, as if the Lord-Father's gaze lingered here. His axe leaned against the table, its runes faintly aglow, while his tome of law rested beside it, a shield of doctrine. Bromrik's faith was a pillar of iron, unyielding as the Sacred Flame itself, and his quest to uncover its origins was a forge to temper his devotion further.

He turned to a new shelf, his eyes catching on a scroll bound in blackened iron, its seal stamped with a thorned vine—the sigil of the Hollow Flame's heretics. The title read: The Lament of Soryn, Keeper of the Hollowed. Bromrik broke the seal, the iron snapping with a sound like a bone cracking, and unrolled the parchment. Its script was hurried, stained with soot and faint smears of what might have been blood, as if written in the heat of battle. He read, his voice a steady murmur, each word a window into the faith's fractured dawn.

"Soryn, priest of the Hollow Flame, records this in the shadow of defeat. The Hollowed were no demons, but echoes of the First Fire, broken when the world was forged. They offered unity—a flame that burned beyond light or shadow. Vyran called us traitors, but we sought the Lord-Father's whole truth. Our altars were vine and thorn, our prayers a song of balance. Yet Vyran's wrath was a tide, his fires consuming our shrines."

Bromrik's jaw tightened. The Hollow Flame's priests claimed kinship with the Lord-Father's fire, a blasphemy that twisted his stomach, yet his faith held fast. He sought understanding, not wavering. The scroll continued: "The First Ember War scarred the land. We summoned winds that sang of lost gods, fires that burned black as grief. Vyran's Embers answered with steel and flame, their chants drowning ours. Soryn fell at the Battle of Thornveil, his blood sealing our last altar. The Hollowed's whispers faded, but they are not gone. The earth holds their memory."

Bromrik rolled the scroll shut, his fingers steady as stone. The Hollowed were real—a supernatural scourge, their lies seducing even priests. Vyran's war was justice, purging a threat that could have unmade the world. Yet the heretics' claim of a unified fire intrigued him, a puzzle to be solved, not a crack in his belief. He reached for another text, a tome bound in leather scorched to charcoal, titled The Oath of the Seven Embers. Its pages were dense, written in Vyran's own hand, detailing the war's final days.

"The Hollow Flame's priests were my brothers once," Vyran wrote. "Their hearts were pure, but their minds strayed. The Hollowed spoke through them, twisting truth into ruin. I struck them down, my axe heavy with sorrow. The Lord-Father's fire is one, not two. We burned their sigils, sealed their voices in stone, and forged the Path anew. Let no man seek the Hollowed, for their flame is a lie."

Bromrik nodded, his pipe unlit but clenched in his teeth. Vyran's justice was the Flame's foundation, a victory of truth over heresy. Yet the Hollowed's persistence nagged at him, a spark he would chase deeper into the vault's secrets.

The forbidden vault's air was a shroud, heavy with the scent of scorched leather and ancient dust, as if the truths buried here resisted the breath of the living. Bromrik Stonemantle stood at the stone table, its surface etched with burns that spoke of past purges. The lantern's flame cast a steady glow across his bearded face, unyielding as the iron of his faith. His axe rested against the table, its runes a silent vow of justice, while his tome of law lay open, a bastion of the Lord-Father's will. Bromrik's heart was a forge, burning with devotion, his quest to trace the Sacred Flame's origins a pilgrimage to stand closer to its divine source.

He turned to a new shelf, his eyes drawn to a tome bound in obsidian-dark hide, its cover marked with a faint spiral of thorns—the sigil of the Hollow Flame's heresy. The title, The Reckoning of Thornveil, was carved in angular script, as if with a blade. Bromrik pulled it free, the binding groaning like a dying ember, and opened it on the table. Its pages were thick, stained with ash and faint streaks of wax, the words penned in a steady hand that spoke of defiance. He read aloud, his voice a low chant in the vault's silence, each line a glimpse into the faith's blood-soaked birth.

"In the Battle of Thornveil, the Hollow Flame's priests made their final stand. Led by Eryndor, once an Ember, they raised altars of vine and stone, their chants calling winds that wept blood. Eryndor claimed the Lord-Father's fire was halved, its shadow cast out unjustly. The Hollowed, he said, were its lost kin, a flame of ruin and renewal. Vyran, unyielding, met them with steel and fire, his Embers burning through their ranks. The earth split, the sky wept ash, but the Lord-Father's justice prevailed."

Bromrik's fingers tightened on the page, his faith a bulwark against the heretics' claims. Eryndor's betrayal fascinated him—not as a temptation, but as a warning carved in history. He read on: "Eryndor fell to Vyran's axe, his blood soaking the thorned altar. The Hollowed's whispers faded, their power broken. Vyran sealed their shrines in the deep earth, binding them with runes of fire. The Hollow Flame's priests were scourged, their names erased, their sigils burned. The Path of the Sacred Flame rose from their ashes, a beacon of purity."

The words were a hammer, striking sparks of clarity. The Sacred Flame was forged in a war against a real evil— the Hollowed, spirits that twisted truth into lies. Vyran's victory was justice, a cleansing fire that saved the world. Yet the heretics' belief in a dual flame lingered in Bromrik's mind, a puzzle to unravel. He reached for another text, a scroll titled The Confession of Myrith, bound in iron and sealed with a thorned clasp. Its parchment was brittle, the script frantic, as if written under siege.

"Myrith, priestess of the Hollow Flame, writes in chains. We sought the whole fire, light and shadow entwined. The Hollowed were not evil, but balance. Vyran's Embers burned our homes, our kin, our truth. I die unrepentant, for the Hollowed's flame lives in the earth, waiting to rise." Bromrik rolled the scroll shut, his faith unmoved but his curiosity sharper.

The Hollowed's defeat was certain, but their legacy haunted the Flame's foundation, a truth he would pursue to its end.

The vault beneath Cathedral Hill was a crypt of silenced voices, its stone walls etched with the faint scars of forgotten fires. Bromrik Stonemantle stood at the stone table, the lantern's flame casting a steadfast light across his bearded face, its glow as unyielding as his faith. The air was thick with the scent of charred leather and ancient ink, a holy weight that seemed to pulse with the Lord-Father's presence. His axe leaned against the table, its runes a quiet vow of justice, while his tome of law lay open, a bedrock of doctrine. Bromrik's heart burned with the Sacred Flame's purity, his quest to uncover its origins a forge to sharpen his devotion.

He turned to a final shelf, his eyes catching a tome bound in leather blackened to coal, its cover marked with a faint circle of thorns—the Hollow Flame's cursed sigil. The title, The Testament of Vyran's Sorrow, was etched in sharp script, as if carved in grief. Bromrik pulled it free, the binding groaning like a dying breath, and opened it on the table. Its pages were heavy, stained with ash and faint traces of blood, the words penned in Vyran's trembling hand. He read aloud, his voice a low hymn in the vault's silence, each line a stone in the faith's foundation.

"Vyran, first Ember, writes after Thornveil's fall. The Hollow Flame's priests were my kin, their hearts once true. Eryndor, my brother, saw a fire beyond the Lord-Father's light—a flame of shadow and renewal. The Hollowed spoke through him, their lies weaving ruin. I struck him down, my axe heavy with tears. The Lord-Father's fire is one, its purity absolute. We burned their altars, sealed their voices in stone, and forged the Path anew. Yet their thorns haunt me, a wound unhealed."

Bromrik's fingers traced the page, his faith a bulwark against the heretics' folly. Vyran's sorrow was a testament to the cost of justice, not its flaw. He read on: "The Hollowed were spirits of the deep earth, shards of a broken flame. They promised power, but delivered chaos. The First Ember War cleansed the land, village by village, as we shattered their shrines. The Hollow Flame's priests fought with black fire and wailing winds, but the Lord-Father's will was iron. We scourged them, their names erased, their sigils burned. The Path rose, a beacon against the dark."

The words were a clarion, affirming the Sacred Flame's righteous birth. Bromrik's curiosity burned brighter, seeking the war's final truths. He reached for a scroll, The Last Chant of Eryndor, bound in iron and sealed with a thorned clasp. Its parchment was brittle, the script defiant, as if written in the face of death. "Eryndor, Ember turned heretic, speaks before the axe. The Hollowed were the Lord-Father's shadow, cast out unjustly. Our fire was whole—light and ruin entwined. Vyran's blindness doomed us, but the Hollowed's flame lives in the earth, eternal." Bromrik rolled the scroll shut, his faith unmoved, his mind sharp with purpose. The Hollow Flame was a lie, crushed by Vyran's justice, but its echoes lingered, a mystery to be laid bare.

He gathered the texts, their weight a sacred burden, and prepared to ascend. The vault's secrets had unveiled the Flame's origin—a war against a true evil, won by the Lord-Father's will. Yet the schism's shadow remained, a truth to carry into the light.

The vault's silence was a cathedral of its own, its stone walls echoing with the weight of truths long buried. Bromrik Stonemantle stood at the scarred table, the lantern's flame burning steady, a mirror to his iron faith. The air was thick with the scent of ash and ancient parchment, as if the Lord-Father's fire lingered in the vault's shadows. His axe rested against the table, its runes a vow of justice, while his tome of law lay open, a cornerstone of the Sacred Flame's will. Bromrik's heart was a beacon, ablaze with devotion, his quest to uncover the faith's origins a sacred forge to refine his purpose.

He gathered the tomes and scrolls—Annals of the First Ember, The Lament of Soryn, The Reckoning of Thornveil, The Testament of Vyran's Sorrow, The Last Chant of Eryndor—their weight a holy burden under his arm and placed them back on the shelves. The texts had unveiled the Sacred Flame's birth: a righteous war against the Hollowed, spirits of the deep earth, shards of a shattered flame that wove lies into men's souls. Vyran, first Ember, led the Seven against the Hollow Flame's priests, heretics who claimed the Lord-Father's fire was incomplete without its shadow. The schism tore the faith's early days, but Vyran's justice prevailed, burning their altars, sealing their voices, and forging the Path anew.

Bromrik's faith was unshakeable, a hammer that crushed the heretics' folly. The Hollowed were no kin to the Lord-Father, but a plague purged by fire. Yet the schism's complexity—the priests' belief in a unified flame—sharpened his curiosity, a spark to carry forward. He ascended the vault's stair, the lantern's light casting long shadows on the stone. The iron gate clanged shut behind him, its echo a final seal on the truths within. The library above was quiet, the monks gone, the shelves looming like silent sentinels.

Outside, Hellens was cloaked in night, the rain a soft hymn against the cathedral's dome. Bromrik stepped into the chill, his cloak drawn tight. The city's lights flickered like embers, a reflection of the Flame's eternal vigil. He knelt before the Lord-Father's statue in the nave, his axe beside him, and whispered a prayer: "Lord-Father, Your fire is my guide. I've seen Your truth's dawn, and I carry it unbowed. Let my hand wield Your justice, pure and whole."

The Sacred Flame was born in blood and fire, a crusade against a real evil that threatened the world. Vyran's war crushed the Hollow Flame's heresy, erasing their thorned sigils and sealing their voices in the earth. The Lord-Father's justice triumphed, forging a Path of purity that Bromrik served with every breath. The schism was a scar, a reminder of man's frailty, but the Flame's light was absolute. The heretics' dreams of a dual fire were ashes, their legacy a warning etched in history.

Bromrik climbed into his wagon, Krosh snorting in the stable's shadow. He lit his pipe, the flame steady despite the rain, and cracked the reins. "Move, you stubborn beast," he growled, the cart creaking into the night. Bromrik carried the Flame's truth—a torch of justice, kindled in the First Ember War, burning eternal. The Hollowed were gone, their priests scourged, and

the Lord-Father's will reigned supreme. Bromrik Stonemantle was its vessel, and he would wield it until his last breath.

The Nobles' Quarter of Hellens gleamed under the torchlight, its cobbled streets lined with manors of polished stone and gardens trimmed to perfection. Bromrik Stonemantle guided his creaking wagon through the district, Krosh snorting at the pristine paths as if they offended his mule's stubborn soul. The air was rich with the scent of blooming jasmine and roasting meats, a far cry from the coal-dust alleys of Khordin. Bromrik's black robes were streaked with road dust, his axe and tome at his belt, but his iron faith burned steady, undimmed by the city's opulence. His quest in the Cathedral Hill library had forged anew his devotion to the Sacred Flame, and now he sought respite in The Nobles' Nest, a tavern famed for its finery and discretion.

The tavern's sign, a golden bird cradling a goblet, swung gently above its carved oak doors. Two porters in velvet livery took Krosh to the stables, their eyes flicking warily to Bromrik's Inquisitor sigil. He stepped inside, the warmth of the hall enveloping him like a hearth's embrace. The interior was a tapestry of luxury—polished mahogany tables, tapestries of ancient dwarf lords, and a hearth roaring with fragrant cedar. Laughter and the clink of crystal filled the air, nobles in silks and furs dining under chandeliers of wrought silver. Bromrik's boots thudded on the floorboards, drawing glances that quickly turned away.

He settled at a corner table, the chair groaning under his weight, and barked his order to a serving lad. "Roast pheasant, crisp skin. Spiced root mash, heavy on the butter. A bottle of dark grape wine—none of your watered swill." The lad nodded and scurried off. Bromrik lit his pipe, the sweet smoke curling upward, and surveyed the room, his eyes sharp but not unkind. The food arrived swiftly: pheasant glistening with herb-flecked fat, mash steaming, and a bottle of wine as deep as midnight. He tore into the meal, grease slicking his beard, and drank deeply, the wine's blackberry tang warming his gut.

A figure approached his table, her steps deliberate yet graceful. She was a dwarf woman, noble by her bearing, her auburn hair braided with silver clasps, her gown of emerald velvet hugging a frame both sturdy and refined. Her eyes, amber as aged ale, held a spark of curiosity. "Inquisitor," she said, her voice rich as molten gold. "May I join you? The Nobles' Nest is fine, but its company can lack… substance."

Bromrik grunted, gesturing to the empty chair. "Sit, then. I'm Bromrik Stonemantle. Who're you?"

"Lyssa Ironvein," she replied, easing into the seat. "Of the old forge clans. Your meal looks hearty. Mind if I order the same?" She waved to the server, requesting pheasant, mash, and a glass of the same wine. As they waited, she leaned forward, her smile disarming. "Hellens is a feast for the senses, isn't it? The markets brim with spices from the southern isles, and the taverns pour vintages older than my kin's halls. What brings an Inquisitor to this gilded cage?"

Bromrik chewed thoughtfully, swallowing a bite. “Business of the Flame. But tonight, just food and rest. Hellens is grand, aye, but it’s soft. Too much silk, not enough stone.”

Lyssa laughed, her voice a warm chime. “True. The nobles here forget the forges that built their wealth. My clan still hammers steel in the underhalls. We dine well, though—try the smoked trout next time. It melts like prayer.”

Their plates arrived, and they ate in companionable silence, trading tales of Hellens’ quirks—the pompous lords, the street bards’ bawdy songs, the cathedral’s endless bells. Lyssa’s wit matched her wine, sharp yet smooth, and Bromrik found himself easing, his gruffness softened by her warmth.

The hearth’s glow bathed The Nobles’ Nest in a golden haze, the clink of crystal and soft lute strains weaving through the air. Bromrik Stonemantle leaned back, his plate nearly clean, the pheasant’s herb-crusted skin reduced to scraps, the spiced mash a memory of butter and warmth. The dark wine stained his beard, its blackberry depth lingering on his tongue. Across the table, Lyssa Ironvein savored her meal, her auburn braids catching the firelight, her amber eyes glinting with a noble’s poise and a forge clan’s grit. Bromrik puffed his pipe, the sweet smoke curling between them, a bridge over their shared table.

Lyssa sipped her wine, her glass catching the chandelier’s shimmer. “Hellens spoils us with feasts,” she said, her voice rich as molten ore. “Back in the underhalls, we’d roast boar with sage and honey, but here, they drizzle gold dust on trout. Ever tried it, Inquisitor? It’s folly, but it sings on the tongue.”

Bromrik grunted, a half-smile tugging his lips. “Gold’s for coin, not eating. Give me Khordin’s mutton stew—slow-cooked, thick with barley. Hellens’ lords could learn from a miner’s pot.” He drained his glass, refilling it with a steady hand. “You’re no soft noble, Lyssa. What keeps you in this silk trap?”

She laughed, a chime that cut through the tavern’s hum. “Trade, mostly. My clan’s steel feeds Hellens’ armories, but I stay for the game—lords scheming, priests preaching, markets buzzing like forges. It’s alive, Bromrik. Not like your road, I wager, all dust and judgment.”

“Aye,” he said, chewing a last bite of pheasant. “The road’s stone and silence, but the Flame lights it. Hellens is loud, but it’s got heart—buried under the pomp.” Their plates were cleared, and Lyssa ordered a dessert—honeyed figs stuffed with soft cheese, paired with a sweet amber liqueur. They shared the dish, the figs’ sweetness a rare indulgence for Bromrik, the liqueur warming his chest like a hearth.

Lyssa leaned closer, her voice dropping, eyes holding his. “You’re not all fire and scripture, are you? There’s a man under that robe, one who savors a good meal, a fine drink. Hellens can be kind to such men.” She paused, her smile softening. “I’ve a room upstairs, Bromrik. Quiet, warm, with a view of the cathedral’s spires. Join me. Let’s share a moment away from the world’s weight.”

Bromrik met her gaze, his faith a steady flame, but his blood stirred, human and alive. He nodded, setting his pipe down. “Lead on, then.” They rose, Lyssa’s velvet gown rustling as she guided him through the tavern’s glow to a polished stair. Her room was a haven of dark wood and silk, a single candle flickering on a table, the cathedral’s dome visible through a tall window. Lyssa closed the door, her hands finding his, her touch warm as forge embers. Their embrace was fierce yet tender, a shared solace born of fleeting connection, not doctrine or duty. Bromrik’s robes fell beside her gown, and in the candle’s soft light, they made love, a moment of human warmth in a world of fire and stone. As they lay afterward, the cathedral’s bells tolled midnight, a reminder of the Flame’s eternal watch.

Cathedral Hills Inquisition

The dawn light filtered through the silk-curtained window of Lyssa Ironvein’s room in The Nobles’ Nest, casting a soft glow across the rumpled bed. Bromrik Stonemantle stirred, his bearded face half-buried in the pillow, the warmth of Lyssa’s body a quiet comfort beside him. Her auburn braids spilled across the sheets, her breathing steady in sleep. Bromrik’s faith burned iron-steady in his heart, the Sacred Flame’s will his lodestar, yet the night’s human solace lingered like pipe smoke. He rose silently, his muscles stiff from the road, and dressed in his soot-dark robes, the chain at his belt clinking as he strapped on his axe and tome. Lyssa murmured but did not wake, and Bromrik spared her a glance—gruff, but not unkind—before slipping out.

The tavern’s grand hall was quiet, the chandeliers dim, the hearth reduced to embers. Bromrik’s boots thudded on the polished floorboards as he crossed to his corner table from the night before. His pipe lay where he’d left it, its bowl cold but familiar. He tucked it into his cloak, the weight a small anchor, and stepped into the chill morning air of Hellens’ Nobles’ Quarter. The streets were stirring, servants sweeping cobbles, nobles’ carriages rattling past. Bromrik climbed into his wagon, Krosh snorting in the stable’s shadow, and cracked the reins. “Move, you cursed beast,” he growled, the cart creaking toward Cathedral Hill.

The hill’s polished steps rose through the mist, braziers burning fierce as the Lord-Father’s gaze. Bromrik tethered Krosh at the base and ascended, his tome under his arm, the axe at his belt a vow of justice. The cathedral’s iron doors loomed, carved with martyrs’ flames, and he entered the nave, the air thick with myrrh and wax. Monks chanted softly, their voices a low pulse, but a tension hung beneath the harmony, sharp as a drawn blade. In the Inquisition office Burnard waited.

“Inquisitor Stonemantle,” Burnard rasped, his voice low, eyes darting. “The Flame is wounded. Heresy festers here, in Cathedral Hill’s heart.” Bromrik’s jaw tightened, his faith a furnace. “What has happened ?” Burnard leaned closer, his breath sour with fear. “Three monks—Gael, Thoryn, and Veld—caught in demon worship, hidden in the undercrypts. They carved sigils, spilled blood, called names no faithful tongue should speak. They’re in the

dungeons now, awaiting judgment. As an Inquisitor, you must interrogate them, Bromrik. Their crime is blasphemy at the Flame's core. Deliver the Lord-Father's justice."

Bromrik nodded, his hand resting on his axe. "I'll see it done. The Flame burns clean, most certainly here." Burnard's eyes gleamed with grim approval. "Four knights of the Sacred Flame will join you. They're… persuasive. The truth will be torn from these traitors, and their punishment final." Bromrik turned toward the dungeon's entrance, a shadowed stair beyond the altar, his heart ablaze with purpose. The cathedral's bells tolled, a call to purge the unholy from the Flame's sanctum.

The dungeon stair beneath Cathedral Hill spiraled into a throat of stone, its air dank with moss and iron's bitter tang. Bromrik Stonemantle descended, his boots echoing like hammer strikes, the lantern in his hand casting jagged shadows on the walls. His soot-dark robes brushed the damp steps, the axe at his belt clinking softly, the tome of law tucked under his arm a shield of divine will. The cathedral's chants faded above, swallowed by the dungeon's oppressive silence, broken only by distant drips and the faint clank of chains. Bromrik's faith burned iron-hot, a furnace of justice, his purpose clear: to purge the blasphemy festering in the Sacred Flame's heart.

At the stair's end, a vaulted chamber opened, its walls hewn from bedrock, lit by flickering torches that bled black smoke. Four knights of the Sacred Flame stood waiting, their crimson tabards emblazoned with the flame sigil, their faces obscured by visored helms etched with runes of purification. Their armor gleamed, but their hands bore the stains of their trade—blood and ash. One, taller than the rest, stepped forward, his voice a low growl through his helm. "Inquisitor Stonemantle, I'm Sir Kael. These are Brothers Torv, Renn, and Halrik. We serve the Flame's wrath. The heretics await."

Bromrik nodded, his bearded face stern. "Show me." Kael gestured to a row of iron doors, each carved with the Lord-Father's sigil, now defaced with scratches that formed thorn-like patterns. "Gael, Thoryn, and Veld," Kael said. "Caught in the undercrypts, chanting to demons, their altars slick with goat's blood. They carved sigils—vines and thorns, not the Flame's runes. This is no mere heresy, Inquisitor. It's a wound in the Flame's sanctum."

Bromrik's hand tightened on his tome, his faith a blade honed for judgment. "What tools do you wield?" Torv, a squat knight with a scarred gauntlet, pointed to a stone table laden with instruments: iron pliers glowing red from a brazier, a rack of spiked thumbscrews, a water bucket for drowning truths, and a strappado rope dangling from the ceiling. "They'll speak," Torv rasped. "Or break."

"Truth first," Bromrik said, his voice cold as steel. "Then justice." Kael opened the first door, revealing a cell where Gael, a gaunt monk with hollow eyes, sat chained to the wall, his robes torn, his fingers stained with dried blood. The air reeked of fear and sulfur, a faint whisper of unholy chants lingering like smoke. Bromrik stepped inside, the knights flanking him, their instruments clinking. He set his tome on a stool, opened it to a passage of judgment, and fixed Gael with a stare that burned like the Flame itself.

“Gael,” Bromrik said, his voice a hammer. “You’ve defiled the Lord-Father’s house with demon worship. Name your master, your rites, your sin. Speak, or the Flame will tear it from you.” Gael’s lips trembled, but he said nothing, his eyes darting to the knights’ glowing pliers. Kael nodded to Torv, who seized the pliers and approached, the metal hissing in the damp air. Bromrik’s faith was unyielding, a beacon in the dungeon’s dark, ready to cleanse the blasphemy with fire and steel. The interrogation had begun, and the Lord-Father’s justice would not be denied.

The dungeon cell was a cage of cold stone, its air thick with the stench of sweat and sulfur, the torchlight casting grotesque shadows across the defaced sigil-carved walls. Bromrik Stonemantle stood before the chained monk Gael, his soot-dark robes a stark contrast to the cell’s gloom, his axe at his belt a silent vow of justice. The tome of law lay open on the stool, its pages heavy with scripture, a beacon of the Lord-Father’s will. Bromrik’s faith was a furnace, unyielding as iron, his purpose to purge the blasphemy that dared taint Cathedral Hill, the Sacred Flame’s heart. The four knights—Kael, Torv, Renn, and Halrik—loomed behind, their crimson tabards flickering in the torchlight, their visored helms hiding all but the glint of righteous wrath.

Gael’s hollow eyes darted from Bromrik to Torv, who held the glowing pliers, their heat a low hiss in the damp air. “Speak,” Bromrik repeated, his voice a blade. “Name the demon you worshipped, the rites you defiled this holy ground for.” Gael’s lips parted, but only a whimper escaped, his blood-stained fingers trembling in their chains. Kael nodded, and Torv seized Gael’s hand, forcing his fingers into the pliers’ jaws. The metal clamped down, a sickening crunch echoing as Gael screamed, the sound raw and piercing, bouncing off the stone. Bromrik’s face remained stone, his faith unmoved by the monk’s pain, for blasphemy demanded truth at any cost.

“Who is your master?” Bromrik pressed, leaning closer, his beard flecked with pipe ash. Gael gasped, tears mixing with blood on his gaunt face. “No… no master… only voices… they promised power…” Torv twisted the pliers, another finger cracking, and Gael’s scream broke into sobs. “Thorns! They spoke of thorns… a flame below the earth!” Bromrik’s eyes narrowed, the thorned sigils on the walls echoing the heresies he’d read of in the vault. “The Hollowed,” he growled. “You dared call their filth in the Flame’s sanctum?”

Renn stepped forward, his gauntleted hand gripping a thumbscrew, its spikes glinting. He fastened it to Gael’s other hand, twisting slowly, the metal biting into flesh. Gael writhed, chains rattling, his voice a choked plea. “We… we sought truth! The Flame… it’s not whole… they said—” Kael struck him across the face, silencing the blasphemy, blood spraying onto the floor. Bromrik raised a hand, his voice cold as iron. “Enough. He speaks heresy. Name your accomplices, Gael. Thoryn and Veld—did they carve the sigils, spill the blood?”

Gael slumped, his breath ragged, eyes glassy. “Yes… we three… in the undercrypts… we heard the voices… they sang of a fire eternal…” Bromrik’s faith burned brighter, a hammer to crush such lies. He nodded to Halrik, who hefted a bucket of murky water, its surface rippling in the torchlight. “Drown the lies from him,” Bromrik ordered. Halrik seized Gael’s

head, plunging it into the bucket, bubbles erupting as the monk thrashed, his chains clanking against the wall. Bromrik watched, his tome open to a passage of judgment: “The unclean tongue shall choke on its sin.” The knights’ torture was the Flame’s tool, and Gael’s truth would surface, or his soul would break. The interrogation pressed on, the dungeon a crucible for the Lord-Father’s justice.

The dungeon’s air was a miasma of blood and damp stone, the torchlight flickering like the Lord-Father’s wrath. Bromrik Stonemantle stood unmoved, his soot-dark robes absorbing the cell’s gloom, the axe at his belt a silent promise of justice. Gael slumped in his chains, his face pale and bloodied, his confession of thorned sigils and Hollowed voices a stain on the Sacred Flame’s sanctum. The tome of law lay open on the stool, its scripture a hammer against blasphemy. Bromrik’s faith was iron, a beacon in the darkness, his duty to purge Cathedral Hill’s heresy unwavering. The four knights—Kael, Torv, Renn, and Halrik—stood ready, their crimson tabards streaked with ash, their visored helms glinting with righteous zeal.

Kael opened the next cell’s iron door, its hinges groaning like a dying soul. Thoryn, a wiry monk with a shaved scalp and feverish eyes, sat chained, his robes torn, his hands crusted with dried blood from carving unholy sigils. The cell reeked of sulfur, the thorned patterns on the walls pulsing faintly, as if alive. Bromrik stepped inside, his voice a blade. “Thoryn, you’ve defiled the Flame’s heart with demon worship. Name the rites, the voices you called. Speak, or the Flame will burn your truth free.”

Thoryn’s lips curled in defiance, his voice hoarse. “The Flame is a lie… the Hollowed are truth…” Kael snarled, nodding to Renn, who seized a strappado rope from the ceiling. The knights bound Thoryn’s wrists, hoisting him until his arms twisted backward, the joints popping with a sickening crack. Thoryn gasped, his feet scrabbling against the floor, pain etching his face. Bromrik’s eyes narrowed, his faith a bulwark against the monk’s heresy. “Who taught you these lies? Was it Gael? Veld? Name your demon!”

Thoryn choked out a laugh, blood flecking his lips. “Zethar… the Thorned Voice… he speaks below… eternal fire…” Torv stepped forward, gripping a red-hot iron rod from the brazier, its glow casting shadows like claws. He pressed it to Thoryn’s chest, the flesh sizzling, a scream tearing from the monk’s throat, echoing through the dungeon. Bromrik’s hand rested on his tome, open to a passage: “The heretic’s tongue shall burn before the Flame.” He leaned closer, his voice cold. “Zethar is no god, but a Hollowed lie. Confess your rites, Thoryn, or your soul breaks next.”

Renn tightened the strappado, Thoryn’s shoulders straining, his screams fading to whimpers. “We… we carved the thorns… spilled blood… Zethar promised… power over death…” Halrik produced a pair of spiked tongs, clamping them on Thoryn’s ear, twisting until blood poured. Thoryn’s defiance cracked, his voice a sob. “Veld led us… he heard Zethar first… in the undercrypts!” Bromrik nodded, his faith a hammer striking truth from lies. The knights lowered Thoryn, his body slumping, but Bromrik’s gaze was already on the next door. Veld, the ringleader, awaited, his blasphemy the deepest wound in the Flame’s sanctum.

“Bind him,” Bromrik ordered, turning to Kael. “We move to Veld. The Flame demands all truths before justice falls.” The knights dragged Thoryn back to his chains, their instruments clinking, the dungeon a crucible where heresy would burn. Bromrik’s heart blazed with purpose, ready to carve the final confession from the last heretic, the Lord-Father’s will guiding his hand.

The dungeon’s shadows writhed like serpents, the torchlight dim against the stone walls scarred with thorned sigils. Bromrik Stonemantle stood as a pillar of justice, his soot-dark robes blending with the gloom, the axe at his belt a vow of the Lord-Father’s wrath. The tome of law lay open on the stool, its scripture a shield against the heresy that defiled Cathedral Hill. Gael and Thoryn’s confessions—tales of Zethar, the Thorned Voice, and blood-soaked rites—had bared the wound, but Veld, the ringleader, was its source. Bromrik’s faith was a furnace, burning pure, his purpose to carve truth from this final heretic. The knights—Kael, Torv, Renn, and Halrik—flanked him, their crimson tabards stained with blood, their visored helms gleaming with zeal.

Kael unlocked the third cell’s iron door, its groan a prelude to judgment. Veld sat chained, a broad monk with a grizzled beard, his eyes burning with a fanatic’s fervor, his robes crusted with blood and ash. The cell reeked of sulfur and decay, the thorned sigils pulsing faintly, as if Zethar’s voice lingered. Bromrik stepped inside, his voice cold as steel. “Veld, you led this blasphemy, calling demons in the Flame’s sanctum. Name your rites, your master. Confess, or the Flame will rip your soul bare.”

Veld’s laugh was a rasp, defiant. “Zethar is no demon… he’s the true fire, the shadow your Flame denies!” Kael snarled, nodding to Halrik, who seized a rack of iron spikes from the table. The knights bound Veld’s arms to a wooden frame, driving the spikes into his forearms, blood welling as he grunted, his face twisting but unyielding. Bromrik’s faith stood firm, a hammer against such lies. “Zethar is a Hollowed filth,” he said. “You carved his sigils, spilled blood. Who taught you this heresy?”

Halrik twisted the spikes, Veld’s grunt becoming a stifled scream, blood dripping to the floor. Torv stepped forward, wielding a flail of knotted cords studded with iron barbs. He lashed Veld’s back, the barbs tearing flesh, each strike a thud that echoed with the monk’s gasps. “Speak!” Bromrik roared, his tome open to a passage: “The heretic’s flesh shall yield to the Flame’s truth.” Veld’s eyes gleamed, blood flecking his beard. “I… heard Zethar… in dreams… he showed me the thorns… the fire below… we three answered… to free the truth!”

Renn produced a pear of anguish, its metal petals glinting cruelly. He forced it into Veld’s mouth, twisting the screw to pry his jaws apart, muffling his cries. Veld thrashed, chains rattling, his confession spilling in broken gasps. “We… built an altar… in the undercrypts… offered blood… Zethar promised… eternity!” Bromrik’s faith blazed, a sword to sever such blasphemy. “You’ve damned your soul,” he said, nodding to Kael. The knights unbound Veld, his body sagging, but Bromrik’s gaze was unyielding. The confessions were complete —Gael’s fear, Thoryn’s defiance, Veld’s zeal—all pointed to a heresy that struck at the Flame’s core.

“Prepare them,” Bromrik ordered, his voice a knell. “The Flame’s justice falls tonight.” The knights dragged Veld back to his chains, their instruments slick with blood, the dungeon a forge where truth was burned clean. Bromrik gripped his axe, ready to deliver the Lord-Father’s final judgment, the weight of Cathedral Hill’s sanctity on his shoulders.

The dungeon beneath Cathedral Hill was a crucible of judgment, its stone walls slick with damp and blood, the air heavy with the reek of sulfur and torn flesh. Bromrik Stonemantle stood at the chamber’s heart, his soot-dark robes a shroud, the axe at his belt gleaming with the promise of the Lord-Father’s wrath. The tome of law rested on the stool, its open pages stained with torch soot, a testament to the Flame’s unyielding will. Gael, Thoryn, and Veld’s confessions—tales of Zethar’s thorned voice, blood-soaked altars, and Hollowed lies—had laid bare their blasphemy, a wound in the Sacred Flame’s sanctum. Bromrik’s faith was a beacon, iron-steady, his purpose to deliver justice where heresy dared strike.

The four knights—Kael, Torv, Renn, and Halrik—moved with grim precision, their crimson tabards spattered with blood, their visored helms reflecting the flickering torches. Kael dragged a heavy wooden block to the chamber’s center, its surface pitted from past judgments, stained dark with the cost of sin. Torv and Renn cleared the torture instruments—pliers, thumbscrews, flails, and the pear of anguish—stacking them on the stone table, their metal glinting like teeth. Halrik hauled a brazier closer, its coals glowing red, casting heat that made the air shimmer. The knights’ silence was a prayer, their work a ritual to prepare the dungeon for the Flame’s final act.

Bromrik gripped his axe, its haft worn smooth by years of service, the runes along its blade pulsing faintly, as if the Lord-Father approved. He surveyed the block, its weight a mirror to the crime—heresy in Cathedral Hill, the Flame’s stronghold, was a blasphemy beyond redemption. “Bring them,” he ordered, his voice a knell echoing off the stone. Kael nodded, and the knights moved to the cells. Gael was first, his gaunt frame trembling, his hollow eyes glassy with fear as Torv dragged him to the block. Thoryn followed, his wiry body slumped, defiance broken by the strappado’s agony, Renn’s grip unyielding. Veld came last, his grizzled beard matted with blood, his fanatic’s fervor dimmed but not extinguished, Halrik forcing him forward.

The monks were bound at the wrists, their chains clanking as they were positioned near the block, their torn robes clinging to bloodied flesh. The thorned sigils on the walls seemed to pulse, a faint whisper of Zethar’s voice lingering, but Bromrik’s faith burned it away. He opened his tome to a passage of execution: “The heretic’s head shall fall, his soul cast to the Flame’s judgment, that the earth may be cleansed.” His voice was steady, a hammer striking truth. “Gael, Thoryn, Veld—you’ve defiled the Lord-Father’s house with demon worship. Zethar’s lies end here. Speak your final words.”

Gael whimpered, his voice a sob. “Mercy… I was weak…” Thoryn spat, his eyes dull. “Zethar… will rise…” Veld’s gaze burned, his rasp defiant. “The thorns… eternal…” Bromrik’s face was stone, his faith a sword to sever such blasphemy. He nodded to Kael, who forced Gael to his knees before the block, the monk’s chains rattling. The knights stood watch, their hands on sword hilts, the brazier’s heat a prelude to the Flame’s justice. Bromrik

raised his axe, its blade a crescent of divine will, ready to deliver the Lord-Father's judgment in the dungeon's shadowed depths.

The dungeon's air was a shroud of blood and ash, the brazier's red glow casting a hellish light across the stone walls, where thorned sigils seemed to writhe in their death throes. Bromrik Stonemantle stood before the execution block, its pitted surface a silent altar to the Lord-Father's justice. His soot-dark robes hung heavy, the axe in his hands a blazing emblem of the Sacred Flame, its runes flaring with divine wrath. The tome of law lay open, its scripture a chant of judgment: "The heretic's blood shall purify the earth." Bromrik's faith was iron, a furnace that burned away the monks' blasphemy, his duty to cleanse Cathedral Hill's sanctum unwavering. The knights—Kael, Torv, Renn, and Halrik—stood as sentinels, their crimson tabards bloodied, their visored helms fixed on the condemned.

Gael knelt before the block, his gaunt frame trembling, his hollow eyes wet with tears, his final plea for mercy a faint whimper. Kael gripped his shoulders, forcing his neck to the block's edge, the chains clanking as Gael's bloodied hands twitched. Bromrik raised his axe, its blade a prayer, his voice a thunderous decree. "Gael, for your demon worship, the Flame claims your soul." The axe fell, a swift arc of steel that severed flesh and bone with a wet crunch, Gael's head rolling free, blood gushing onto the stone, his body collapsing like a broken doll. The knights murmured prayers, the brazier's flames flaring as if fed by the flame's triumph.

Torv dragged Thoryn forward, the wiry monk's defiance crushed, his body limp from the strappado's agony, his final words a curse upon Zethar's name. Renn positioned him at the block, Thoryn's shaved scalp glistening with sweat, his chains scraping the floor. Bromrik wiped his axe clean on a rag, its blade gleaming anew, ready for the next judgment. "Thoryn," he intoned, his voice cold as the dungeon's depths, "your heresy ends in ash. The Lord-Father's fire is whole." Thoryn's eyes flickered, a spark of fear, before Kael's gauntlet forced his neck down. The axe descended, a flash of divine will, cleaving through with a bone-jarring thud, Thoryn's head tumbling, blood pooling with Gael's, the stone drinking deep, a silent altar for the flame.

The knights stepped back, their chants low, a hymn of purification, as Bromrik stood unmoved, his faith a bulwark against the stench of death. Veld, the ringleader, waited, his grizzled form slumped in chains, his fanatic's zeal a dying ember. The thorned sigils on the walls dimmed, Zethar's whispers silenced by the Flame's wrath, but Bromrik's vigil was not yet complete. He tested the axe's edge with his thumb, a ritual of precision, the steel warm from its work. The execution of Veld would seal the judgment, a final blow to purge the blasphemy from Cathedral Hill's heart, where the Sacred Flame burned eternal.

Bromrik nodded to Halrik, who moved to bring Veld forward. The knights' armor clinked, their hands steady, the brazier's heat a mirror to their zeal. The dungeon was a forge, its justice a hammer, and Bromrik's axe its blade, ready to carve purity from the flesh of the damned. The Lord-Father's will was clear, and no heresy would stain His sanctum. The final execution loomed, a testament to the Flame's unyielding truth.

The dungeon’s air was thick with the coppery stench of blood, the brazier’s coals casting a crimson glow across the stone, where the execution block stood as a silent altar. Bromrik Stonemantle gripped his axe, its blade slick with the blood of Gael and Thoryn, the runes along its edge pulsing with the Lord-Father’s wrath. His soot-dark robes were spattered with red, the tome of law open on the stool, its scripture a chant of justice: “The Flame consumes the unclean, and their ashes sanctify.” Bromrik’s faith was a furnace, unyielding as iron, his duty to purge Cathedral Hill’s blasphemy complete with Veld’s death. The knights—Kael, Torv, Renn, and Halrik—stood vigil, their crimson tabards drenched, their visored helms fixed on the final heretic.

Halrik dragged Veld to the block, the grizzled monk’s body sagging, his fanatic’s zeal dimmed by torture’s toll, his beard matted with blood. The thorned sigils on the walls were dull, Zethar’s whispers crushed by the Flame’s might, yet Veld’s eyes burned with a dying spark. Kael forced him to his knees, chains clanking as his neck met the block’s edge, the stone slick with his brothers’ blood. Bromrik raised his axe, its weight a prayer, his voice a thunderous decree. “Veld, for leading demon worship in the Flame’s sanctum, your soul is forfeit. Speak your final blasphemy.”

Veld’s rasp was defiant, blood flecking his lips. “Zethar… lives… the thorns will bloom…” Bromrik’s faith blazed, a sword to sever such lies. “The Flame is whole,” he declared, and the axe fell, a swift crescent of divine will that cleaved through flesh and bone with a wet thud, Veld’s head rolling free, blood gushing to join the crimson pool. His body slumped, a husk cleansed by justice, the dungeon trembling as if the Flame itself roared approval.

The knights chanted a low hymn, their voices a dirge of purification, the brazier’s flames surging, consuming the air’s taint. Bromrik wiped his axe clean, its blade gleaming anew, a testament to the Lord-Father’s victory. The thorned sigils faded, Zethar’s influence burned away, Cathedral Hill’s sanctity restored. He closed the tome, its weight a comfort, and turned to Kael. “Burn the bodies,” he ordered. “No trace of their sin remains.” The knights nodded, Torv and Renn hauling the corpses to a pyre in the chamber’s corner, Halrik feeding the brazier’s coals to kindle a blaze.

Bromrik ascended the dungeon stair, the knights’ chants fading behind, the air growing lighter as he reached the cathedral’s nave. The Lord-Father’s statue loomed, its brazier eternal, and Bromrik knelt, his axe beside him, whispering a prayer: “Your Flame is pure, Your justice done.” His faith was unshaken, a hammer that had crushed heresy in the Flame’s heart. The cathedral’s bells tolled, a solemn knell for the fallen, a call to vigilance. Bromrik rose, his robes heavy with blood and duty, and stepped into Hellens’ dawn, the city’s spires aglow with the Flame’s light.

The inquisition office at Cathedral Hill was a chamber of austere grandeur, its walls of polished basalt etched with runes of the Sacred Flame, a single brazier burning eternal at its heart. Bromrik Stonemantle entered, his soot-dark robes still faintly stained with dungeon blood, his axe at his belt, the tome of law under his arm. His faith was iron, a furnace forged through trials, the execution of Gael, Thoryn, and Veld a fresh scar on his soul’s ledger. Burnard, an Inquisitor of weathered years, stood by a carved oak table, his grey beard

framing a face carved by duty, his crimson robes bearing the flame sigil. “Bromrik,” he said, voice grave as stone. “The heretics’ trial is done. Their ashes sanctify the Flame.”

Bromrik nodded, setting his tome down. “Zethar’s lies died with them. Cathedral Hill is pure again.” Burnard’s eyes glinted, approving. “Your axe was the Lord-Father’s hand. Their blasphemy struck deep, but your justice held.” Before Bromrik could reply, the door opened, admitting three monks in coal-black robes, their faces solemn, carrying a silver-bound manuscript and a golden chain etched with the flame’s mark. Burnard gestured them forward, his voice rising. “The Flame has seen your service, Bromrik Stonemantle. Today, you ascend.”

The monks formed a semicircle, the brazier’s light casting their shadows long. Burnard opened the manuscript, its pages heavy with the Sacred Flame’s lore, and read in a resonant chant: “By the Lord-Father’s will, Bromrik Stonemantle is named Head Inquisitor, carrier of the highest order, sworn to uphold the Flame’s truth, to burn heresy, to forge purity in blood and ash.” The monks intoned a hymn, their voices a low pulse, as Burnard draped the golden chain over Bromrik’s shoulders, its weight a vow, the flame sigil gleaming against his robes. “Wear this mark,” Burnard said, “and lead the order as you’ve served—unyielding, true.”

Bromrik stood taller, his faith a beacon, the chain a mantle of duty. The monks bowed, retreating, and Burnard clasped his arm. “Your quarters await—living room, study, workroom. Guide the Flame from there.” Bromrik nodded, his heart ablaze with purpose, and followed a monk to his new chambers. The rooms were stark yet noble: a living room with a hearth, a workroom with a broad desk for judgments, and a study lined with shelves for scripture and pipe smoke. The air was clean, heavy with the scent of cedar and wax, a sanctum for the Flame’s will.

Alone in his study, Bromrik opened a sealed letter. He broke the wax, reading swiftly: The last three on your list—Eldric, Myra, and Toren—are canceled. Eldric died of fever; Myra and Toren cleared by evidence of false accusation. Bromrik’s eyes narrowed, his thought sharp. “Three got away, replaced by three I just executed—fair enough!” He tucked the letter away, his faith unmoved, justice’s scales balanced.

Bromrik set his tome on the desk, its leather worn by years of justice. He poured a glass of dark grape wine from a decanter, its blackberry depth a rare comfort, and lit his pipe, the sweet smoke curling like a prayer. His hand rested on the tome, the golden chain glinting in the candlelight, his bearded face etched with resolve. The cathedral’s bells tolled, a distant hymn of eternity, and Bromrik spoke, his voice a quiet thunder. “Blessed be You, Lord-Father.” His faith was the Flame itself, eternal, unyielding, a fire to burn the world clean. Outside, Hellens slept under the cathedral’s spires, and Bromrik Stonemantle, Head Inquisitor, stood ready, the Lord-Father’s justice his everlasting torch.